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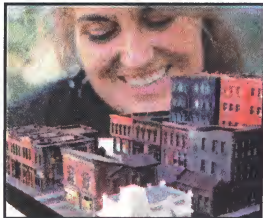
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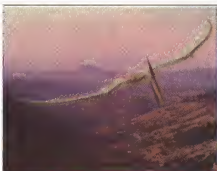
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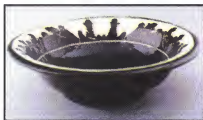
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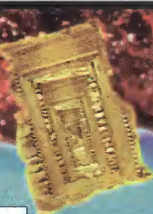
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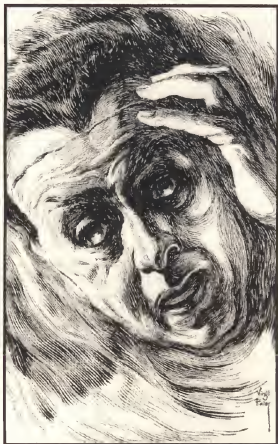
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EDITORIAL

By E.J. GOLD

Illustrated by Finlay

Lightning flashed and thunder rolled across the darkening sky as I lay flat on my back, staring through the steel-framed glass at the lower east side skyline.

We lived on the tenth floor, which meant that almost everything else in the neighborhood was several stories below us.

I could see all the way to the East River from my bedroom window; Brooklyn Heights glowed dimly in the pale moonless night.

Distant sirens pierced the evening stillness; so did the honking, roaring, thrumming, screaming din that churned incessantly below us, day and night.

If you've ever lived in a city like New York or Naples, you'd understand, then, what happened to me on my first night away from the city.

Sure, I'd lived in Columbia, South Carolina, during most of the war—near Fort Charleston—but since 1945, had spent virtually every waking and sleeping moment of my life (one day was a much larger percentage of my life then, and passed far more slowly) thoroughly steeped in the kind of noise pollution unknown until modern times.

Now that I'm much, much older (I'm at the age where a year goes by like a minute, and a minute goes by like a year—or was that always the way it was?) the noise pollution seems even worse.

Not today's noise pollution. Hell, I *know* that's worse. No, it's my own noise pollution, the sounds I grew up with, grew to expect. Like roentgens, it was part of my *background radiation*, the *tabula overcrowdica* upon which I painted the scenes of my life.

That first night in the country was like an eternity in hell. I listened, at first, for *any* sound. The stillness and silence grew terrible and oppressive, hurting my eardrums with the sheer *absence* of grinding, perpetual auditory assaults.

Maybe you know the sensation and the feeling. The overwhelming panic when you realize that there's probably *never* going to be a distant wailing siren growing ever-closer, answering a 208 robbery downstairs in 3-B.

I lay there shivering in the summer darkness, straining for the slightest engine hum, brake, horn, another horn, another horn, an ocean of horns and curses. . . no use; the insurmountable silence remained unmoved, an adamant adversary, if I may quote a recently unpurchased story ms.

Suddenly, sometime around three in the morning—I had lain awake since forced retirement at nine P.M.—a shot (now, of course, I realize it must have been a backfiring Plymouth Sedan which our neighbor, Ada Sparer, drove every morning down to the open-air market) rang out and reverberated against Bear Mountain out toward Saugerties. Reassured, my head fell back onto the softness of the goose-down pillow and I passed into a deep, dreamless sleep.

—E.J. GOLD

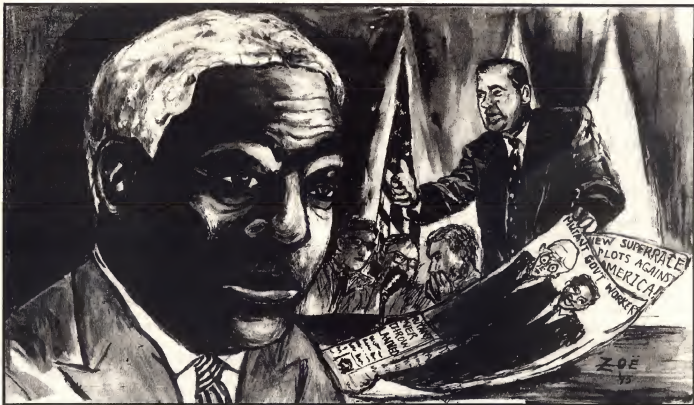
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RECKLESS: The New Sven Fort Novelette

By JEAN MARIE STINE

Illustrated by Zoë

The man his neighbors called Sven Fort took a sip from the screwdriver, a drag from a Camel “have a real cigarette”) and looked at his guests eat and drink in the unseasonable October sunshine. His backyard held the usual eclectic Georgetown collection: one laughing clique included Irving, a dentist, a professor, a lobbyist, an attorney, and the toothy young senator from Massachusetts women were said to find irresistible.

Sven sensed a diminutive presence. “More ribs, Senator Rankin?” Without waiting for an answer, he speared meat from the barbecue and dropped it on the Mississippian’s plate next to JoAnn’s potato salad.

“Thank yah, Sven,” the gnomish senator lifted a glass of Old Taylor. “Yah an’ yo’ pretty wife sho’ put on a feed.”

Sven’s glance went to JoAnn. He couldn’t help admiring her trim figure and poise among their Georgetown neighbors. She was fussing with a baby, dark hair caught behind one ear, a rare smile on her kind, serene face. JoAnn wanted children — but couldn’t have

them. (One reason Sven had married her; if ferrets ever forced him to flee this era, he didn’t want to leave a woman behind burdened with children.)

“You air a true Southerner, Sven,” Rankin rolled away, a short, almost comic figure in his old-fashioned tie and collar, “even if yah hail from Norway.”

“Thank you, Senator.” He wondered what the segregationist’s opinion would be, if Rankin knew the truth about his ancestry. Although he couldn’t help liking the senator personally — Sven hated the man’s politics. A racist and Red-baiter who branded the Civil Rights movement a communist plot, Rankin had helped kill Truman’s FPEC, which would have stopped job discrimination in the U.S.

But Sven could afford to be generous. He knew that long before his own era, the senator’s side would have lost; and Americans of any color would be free to make what they might of their lives — until the nuclear attack that created Central Authority and deprived everyone, equally, of rights.

Sven found himself looking at the grey-haired black man behind the rented bar. He was mixing drinks — the picture of wide-eyed, smiling happiness. “Yesah, bos’, ladiez,” he boomed, “names yo’ po’sin.” Hiring a black man to do work like this always made Sven uncomfortable (he knew he had more in common with the grinning bartender than the men and women who filled his lawn). But the agencies sent blacks, and what was he supposed to do? refuse the man a job?

“I was up before the Loyalty Board,” a hulking man explained to Sven’s neighbor, Gregory, as they

approached, boilermakers in hand. "But I proved it was a snafu — they wanted James Lee Carmichael and not James Henry. It was close — even a rumor could ruin Capital Airlines."

Sven drained his screwdriver, forking slabs of ribs on their plates. "You're a great guy, Sven," Gregory burred. "Isn't he, Slim?"

"A great guy," Slim agreed. They were both a bit drunk. Sven was a bit drunk too.

Gazing out over his well-trimmed, orderly lawn, the well-dressed men and women who filled it, the secure, sprawling house beyond them (a product of the building boom remaking the face of the nation) — Sven heaved a contented sigh. He had only arrived in this era five years earlier, at the end of the war, but he had been here long enough to know that this was the best of all possible worlds — and the best of all possible times.

"You've been gone, Owen, you don't know what's going on." It was Gregory's older brother, Joe, the journalist. "The government is riddled with communists and communist sympathizers. Explain this: in forty-five we had won the war and made the world safe for Democracy. We were the most powerful nation on Earth — two years later half the globe is groaning under Soviet tyranny — while the Brits, the Wops, and the Frogs are going Red. How come?"

The speaker took a pull from a frosted glass, and poked the other in the chest. "We gave it away — somebody gave it away. And they gave it away at Yalta."

"There wasn't any sellout, Joe," his rabbit, mustached companion protested (Sven thought he was from the State Department), taking a pull from his own drink. "I should know. It was a series of bad decisions and misestimations of Russian intent. Roosevelt was dying — he only lived two months. Besides, we couldn't have pacified the world — there are too many hot spots. Let the Russians try."

"Are you nuts?" Gregory's eldest brother said, wiping egg salad from his tie. "Overnight the number under Communist domination increased from 200,000,000 to 800,000,000. That's more than coincidence and bad decisions."

Sven smiled, slathering sauce on the ribs — the strains of "Scarlet Ribbons" wafting from a radio. The politics of this era seemed so innocent. Only a few thousands had been summoned before loyalty boards — in the twenty-sixties review was a monthly routine. In the fifties, all the real problems lay in distant lands. No one who acted intelligently could get hurt — not here in the midst of the United States, with its mighty defenses to protect them. He felt secure, knowing history had turned out no other way.

"Experts believe Soviet accusation of spying against the Yugoslavian Ambassador may be the pretext for direct military intervention." The radio was on for the Navy-Penn State scores. "On the domestic scene, Secretary of State Acheson said we should welcome any Soviet proposal for atomic control. Railroads canceled

six hundred train runs today as the lengthening coal strike brought U.S. fuel stocks to a historic low. Meanwhile, the deadlocked steel strike has hit industrial production and the economy hard."

"Acheson's either a Red — or a fairy," someone spat.

Sven looked for JoAnn, didn't see her — and felt a pang. He'd come to like her very much in the two years since they had met and married — she had an uncanny way of almost reading his mind. A quiet, composed woman, who said little and thought much, she had been working as a stenographer in the D.O.A. — but she was an orphan, thrust on relatives all her life, and wanted a home of her own. JoAnn had been the one to suggest she quit work to become a homemaker.

"Sven —" Gregory's twelve year-old, Timmy, stared up through his glasses. "My dad says come meet someone."

Sven followed the Alsop boy across the grass.

"These strikes are Soviet inspired," a voice said.

"Bull, it's the same as the Twenties. Profits have soared since the War — but not wages. They had to strike."

"Have you read the first part of the Heinlein serial in the new *Astounding*?" Timmy's eyes glittered behind his lenses. "Neat, huh?" He was a science fiction buff.

"It starts off with a bang, anyway." Sven was a buff, too. Optimistic stories of the future made him laugh — but also seemed to pull him into the page, into the distant stars — where the shadow of Central Authority was unknown.

"Must be a mutant story like 'In Hiding.'" Timmy said.

"Looks like it." Sven envied how easy Heinlein's superhero made escaping a world's security forces seem.

Timmy was earnest. "Sometimes I feel I'm a mutant."

"So do I," Sven replied. "So do I."

"Bette Davis just married her fourth husband." It was Senator Humphrey's wife. "Or was it the third?"

"There's my dad," Timmy pointed.

A group of men were packed around a figure holding court from Sven's lawnchairs. Gregory Alsop, standing by his younger brother, Stewart, another journalist, beckoned Sven.

The junior senator from California was arguing with a man in a brown suit who sprawled back lazily on the lawnchair. The man had a highball, a cigarette, and an easy-going, genial laugh.

"Nuts — you've all got a phobia about the Reds, Dick," the man said, jowls swelling in a grin. "Communists have the same right to vote as anyone else, don't they? They got me elected. And I happen to think Stalin's proposal for world disarmament is a great thing."

The man drained his highball and laughed again. His eyes, almost as slanted as Sven's own, crinkled in

genuine merriment. Everyone laughed with him — he had spoken with such evident insincerity — even Nixon joined in.

"Sven," Gregory said, "meet the man the Washington press corps voted 'The Worst Senator on Capitol Hill.'" The man in the lawnchair laughed along with everyone else. "Tail-gunner, meet my neighbor, Sven. It's his party."

"Great shindig, Sven," Tail-gunner waved his glass.

The screendoor banged, and the senator from Massachusetts emerged, straightening his tie. "Lo, Joe," he gave a toothy smile. "How's tricks?"

"Why did they vote you Worst Senator?" Sven said, working on a screwdriver and a Pall Mall ("filters the smoke further and makes it mild").

Tail-gunner laughed, took a swig from his highball and waved his cigarette-hand modestly.

It was a week later, and the party was at Gregory Alsop's. A blizzard blanketed the East, and everyone was gathered inside the statistician's home.

The youngest Alsop brother, debonair in a white, single-breasted suit, took a puff and began: "Could've been when the Pepsi-Cola lobbyist was covering Tail-gunner's gambling losses. They wanted sugar rationing lifted — so Tail-gunner up and lied to the Senate. Told 'em the D.O.A. had found 800,000 surplus tons — almost won the vote. Or could've been when Tail-gunner was close to a rich former Bund-supporter and championed Nazi officers who massacred captured U.S. troops."

"What?" Sven gasped.

Tail-gunner shrugged. "Lots of Germans in my state thought those boys were railroaded by vengeful Jews."

"You should have seen him brow-beat the Army attorneys that jailed those Nazis," Stewart was admiring. "Or it could've been when Stranlund, the construction king, was covering his losses. Stranlund opposed subsidized housing for returning vets — so Tail-gunner read the Senate a government report supporting his view. He made it up, too."

Joe laughed with everyone else. Then he lit a cigarette, holding out his glass for a refill. A rumpled man bounced up and carried it to the bar. The same black man from the agency was mixing drinks with the same big-eyed friendly smile. (Sven had tried to talk to him after the party at his house — but all he had gotten was some bowing, scraping and a few 'Sho' 'nough bos'es. What else had he expected? What was there to say?)

"I was taught to fight by Injun Charlie," Tail-gunner explained. "He said, 'Hit them in the groin — and keep hitting and hitting and hitting.'" (Everyone laughed.)

Sven saw JoAnn with a group of women (he had lost sight of her earlier) and excused himself.

"State Department's about to fire more than two hundred as 'undesirable' for security reasons," someone said.

JoAnn stood by the picture-window with three other

women — as usual a silent participant smoking Kools, intense interest on her serene, sympathetic face.

"A white woman who marries an African prince has an abnormal mind," Mrs. Rankin declared, sipping her Collins.

The wife of the senator from Massachusetts smiled over her martini: "I think she's as courageous as any soldier."

As Sven approached, JoAnn reached back to touch his face — seeming to sense his presence. "Dear Sven." Her dark eyes were filled with fondness so intense it was disturbing. "We're talking about Ruth Khama."

"She must love Prince Khama very much," Belinda added.

Sven decided he needed a refill, and threaded his way through the hot, smoky room toward the bar.

"— Urey, the guy that helped develop the bomb says the Reds will pass us in the atomic bomb race in two years."

Sven lurched. That drink, he decided, might steady him.

"Alger Hiss, he's the smoking gun at Yalta." The eldest Alsop, Joe, and the rabbit, mustached man were at the bar.

"Hiss was Oliver Wendell Holmes' clerk," the man from D.O.S. insisted. "Frankfurter talked him into government work. Dulles put him in the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. Are they Reds?"

"Yez seh, bos'," the bartender gave Sven the same big smile. "Mo' th' same?" Sven nodded.

Joe poked the man in the chest, firing a question. "The about-face Hiss did on knowing Chambers?"

"Hiss'd known Chambers decades before — when he recognized him — Hiss said so."

"The Pumpkin Papers, Owen?" thumping his friend again.

"Forged. Chambers denied Hiss was involved in spying — then when it was time to provide evidence Hiss committed an actual crime or face libel and perjury charges himself — Chambers produces documents he's 'hidden' for twenty years."

"The Woodstock typewriter, Owen?" the journalist asked.

Both men signaled for refills — the man behind the bar obliging with a big, broad smile. "Proves Hiss innocent. The FBI spent months searching for it — the Hisses find it in Baltimore and notify the FBI. Would a Soviet spy do that?"

"The FBI matched the Pumpkin Papers with its typeface."

"Planted," the little man said. "Hiss' new lawyer found serial numbers that prove that typewriter wasn't manufactured until two months *after* the Pumpkin Papers were typed."

Joe, a former naval pilot, leaned back belligerently. "To hear you talk, Owen — there is no Red Menace."

Sven didn't know who was right. The Russians were a danger — they'd made that clear. And they had spy

systems everywhere, trying to subvert every government in sight. But Sven couldn't believe the U.S. government and citizenry were as ripe with Reds, determined to bring about a Soviet form of government, as many believed.

The red-haired senator from Massachusetts appeared (Sven didn't recall seeing him earlier). "Dick's getting hot," he told Alsop and the D.O.S. man, sweeping them away.

Sven remained behind, with a screwdriver and a Marlboro ("delightfully different"). He had seen a woman who looked like Adele, and needed to think. Adele was probably alive somewhere. He'd thought of her daily — she was the only woman who had seen through to the real him. But finding her would hardly be fair. Adele would be in her forties now, with a world of living — husband, children, 7,000 sunsets and sunrises — between them.

"Red Chinese," a radio blared, "drove Nationalist forces from Kwelin today — their last stronghold on the mainland. Britain's Labor Party claimed victory in the coming elections and promised total nationalization of industry. The continuing U.S. coal strike caused panic in the blizzard-struck East as citizens — from Indianapolis to Buffalo — remained without coal for the third straight day. Secretary Acheson acknowledged Soviet attitudes were troublesome, but still spoke of finding common ground for agreement."

Sven felt slightly inebriated and motioned for another one. "Sho', bos'," the bartender's big eyes shone. "Mo' o' —" He glanced around — Sven realized they were alone. "Sven — that is what they call you? What may it be my pleasure to serve you — another screwdriver?" Sven nodded, speechless — had he had one too many already? The wide-eyed, happiness had vanished with the accent — weary intelligence stared from a lined face.

"I wish to apologize for my rudeness last week. I realize you meant no harm," his eyes looked into Sven's as an equal. "But appearances, you understand — my job — regulations forbid fraternizing with guests."

Sven nodded again, knowing the real issue that divided them. "You sound like a college man," he said finally.

The weary eyes grew pained. "There's not much work in bio-chemistry for a man of my color. I was fortunate to —" He straightened, eyes wide, smile big and happy again. "Yez ladiez, names yo' po'sin." ("Name's Andrew," he whispered.)

Sven moved away following the sound of ragtime — he found the den packed solid. Nixon was on it tonight. Finishing with a glissando, he stood and said: "Did you hear what the Soviet refugee said to the hooker: 'I thought the fifty dollars was just for the blanket!'" He wagged his head, crying "You ain't seen nothin' yet" in his best Durante imitation. (Laughter and applause.)

Sven spotted JoAnn, laughing too, standing next to Kennedy on the far side of the den. Sven was thinking it was time to go home and that he should fight his way

through to get her — when Tail-gunner grabbed him.

"Lend me a hand, Sven." Tail-gunner pulled him into the kitchen — where three men sat around a table.

Tail-gunner pushed over an ashtray, gave Sven a light. "I'm up for election. And —" an embarrassed grin — "I can't exactly run on my record. I need an issue to bamboozle the voters. Something I can hit at and keep hitting at."

Tail-gunner drained his highball, pointed with a cigarette. "Bob recommends the Saint Lawrence Seaway — Charlie, guaranteed pensions for the elderly — but neither's sexy. Father Walsh says fight Reds — but people are sick of hearing about Reds."

He handed his glass to Charlie. "Maybe a new menace? Problem is — in a democracy you can't use Jews or Niggers." Charlie brought the refill. "Doctors — maybe?" Tail-gunner mused. "Bankers — no, they've got money."

"Sven—" it was Timmy. "Can I borrow *Astounding* to reread 'Gulf'? A friend lost my copy."

Father Walsh leaned forward. "What's that, Tim?"

"A story about mutants," the boy said.

"Supermen with big IQs — caused by radiation," Sven explained. "You know, science fiction."

"Men from Mars?" Bob said blankly.

"Here's to Martians," Tail-gunner raised his glass.

Sven felt fingers on the back of his neck. "Come on," JoAnn said. "It's time to go home."

*

"Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America — and all the ships at sea," Sven could hear the radio over the sounds of laughter. "The Soviets warned today against U.S. interference in 'internal Chinese affairs.' Secretary Acheson went a good way toward total recognition of a total enmity between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Nationally: The coal strike continued and temperatures remained in the below zero range — Ford announced it was laying off all 115,000 workers indefinitely. Meanwhile, Senator Kefauver charged that the pending Equal Rights Amendment would mean rape was no longer a crime, and women would be drafted."

Sven stood in the Nixon's front hall, lighting a Lucky ("L.S./M.F.T."), and handing his coat to an ebony maid. (JoAnn had a late appointment with the hairdresser and was joining him when she was finished.)

In the smoky living room, his host finished a drink while turning the radio down. "I've got a bet on with Tail-gunner," he explained.

"Play us something, Dick," Kennedy said, drink in hand.

Sven saw Pat's lips purse. "He just got home, let him rest," she interposed.

"Play 'Someone to Watch Over Me,'" Joe Alsop insisted, waving a glass. "It was Pappy's favorite."

"Wal', ah don't know," Dick joked, doing Jimmy Stewart. "But ah rec'on — if you insist. . . . Wal' aw'right."

Sven heard laughter from the dining room —

decided it was time for a drink.

The bar was across a spacious room filled with mahogany antiques, smoke and people.

"If you ask me," an accented feminine voice was saying, "in some ways women are *not* men's equal — oh no, we are not. In other ways we are their superiors —" (A foreign comedienne, Sven thought) — "oh yes, their superiors."

"Men will fight for freedom," a male voice — but when they are free and life is easy, the fight goes out of them."

Sven saw several faces he knew — including the black one behind the bar. Sven smoked a cigarette, and waited while the crowd thinned out.

"G'd ev'n', seh. Names —" The big, wide-eyed smile disappeared — the wise, grizzled face stared out. "Sven — you're no Swede, no matter what they think —" nodding at the crowd. "There's more than a hint of the tarbrush in you. But everyone has secrets — and none of us are exactly what we seem."

Sven wanted to lean forward and unburden his whole story — 2067, CA, the war, ferrets, Thought Police, the Temporal Transverter — the dying Swede who'd bequeathed his naturalization papers.

But to speak would risk everything — his house — his job — JoAnn — the quiet peace of the fifties. They'd think him insane — and if he were believed, he would only be burdening the present with the dark shadow of the future.

Yet Sven found he could not lie to those eyes. "What's in a name?" he said, shrugging in acknowledgment. Then: "Isn't there something I can do to help you —"

The man stepped back and cold, hard pride came into his face. His voice stung: "I don't need — Yez 'em, lit'le lady —" his head was bobbing — "names yo' po'sin."

"Got a light, stranger?" JoAnn (dark hair piled high, a wing beside each ear) bent forward. Sven lit hers and his.

"You weren't in the living room, so I figured you'd be here." Her eyes smiled at him, serene and tender.

She sipped her martini. "One of the unmarried girls at D.O.A. is preppers. She'll have to move, of course, and make up a dead husband — or face a back-alley abortion mill."

Once word was out, Sven knew, the woman would lose her job and apartment and be ostracized by almost everyone, friends included — that was the dark side of the fifties.

There was a long silence. "Have you seen Belinda?" Sven finally asked.

"I'll find her." JoAnn rose as if reading his mind.

When she was gone, Sven realized he had wanted a chance to apologize to Andrew — and then, what had there been to say to JoAnn? They spent so much time together, anyway.

But Gregory's older brother and his friend from

State staggered up to the bar together. "Granted there may be one or two Red spies in our government," the small, mustached man said. "We've got our own in Moscow — but it's not riddled with them — not enough to do real harm. All the spy cases were smoke and no fire."

Joe poked him in the stomach. "The *Amerasia* magazine case? Jaffee was a friend of Browder, head of the U.S. Party — he visited the Red Consulate and met with Chinese Reds."

The other's glasses gleamed: "A journalist trying to get the big picture — you don't get it from government P.R."

"Printing secret D.O.S. China assessments word for word, Owen. Filing cabinets crammed with restricted documents, including military reports on Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist army, the Japanese fleet, bombing Germany."

"There was no evidence information was given to the Reds. They were our allies then — and had access to all that stuff. The entire case died in court. Besides, what spy would steal documents and print them in their magazine?"

"Strings were pulled high up — evidence suppressed," Joe insisted. "Larson confessed later. Commies in the government were afraid the truth would leak out. You're defensive because some D.O.S. people were implicated."

Sven took his screwdriver, looked in the living room where Nixon was still playing and clowning. The Kennedys were standing together, laughing — JoAnn, by the piano, seemed to stare at them.

"Mr. Sven, here's your *Astounding*." Timmy stared up. "My dad said you'd be here." He grew thoughtful. "Do you think there really are mutants like Timothy Johns and Kettle-belly Baldwin?"

"The head of Navy atomic research says if war comes, we'll see 15,000,000 U.S. dead the first day," a man said.

"If they're like those in 'Gulf,' I hope so," Sven replied. He wished some superior force *had* guided humanity past the nuclear winter that was killing off all life in his own age. But history could only be changed in the minor details — subsequent events always quickly worked themselves out so that its basic course remained unaltered.

"I'm not sure Heinlein's hero was a superman," Timmy said thoughtfully. "He died at the end. A real superman would have outsmarted the villain — and lived."

"The U.S. Commies are moving their headquarters to Harlem," a man said. "That's no surprise — most of the NAACP is Red."

*

"The Red scare's election propaganda," their dentist neighbor, Peress, replied. "After two decades — Republicans were insane to get in office. So they branded all Democrats 'liberals' and all liberals 'Red.'"

Now the whole country's a powderkeg — ready to go for each other's throats."

By the time Sven had stepped outside for some fresh air and a smoke and returned, he found his host, the Alsops and several other men gathered around a radio in the den.

"Come in," Dick said. "Tail-gunner's gonna lose a bet."

"With his rep, the Republicans decided to keep him low profile," Stewart explained. "They sent him to address a women's club in Wheeling." (Everyone laughed.)

"He bet me fifty bucks he'd outfox them and make national headlines from Wheeling," Nixon explained.

"— Philco," the announcer said. "Tonight in Wheeling, Senator McCarthy made stunning charges that have aroused a firestorm of controversy. Here, via transcription—"

"Damn," Nixon said admiringly, "the s.o.b. did it!"

"The world is threatened by a sinister conspiracy." (Everyone laughed.) "That menace has wrecked the peace we fought for — plotted the rise of communism — undermined our government, economy and way of life — and plans to eliminate or enslave every man, woman and child on Earth."

"Hidden among us are blasphemous mutations — spawned by exposure to the atom — whose brains possess monstrous intelligence. These mutants — in appearance ordinary people — call themselves, Homo Novis, the New Men — and are conspiring to replace the human race."

"The existence of a sinister conspiracy of mutants, concealed in our midst may sound like science fiction — but it's sober truth." ("Tail-gunner, sober?" Stewart laughed — and was hushed.) "I have here secret D.O.D. files documenting this menace. I quote: The intellects of Homo Novis are as far beyond Homo Sapiens as the Sun is beyond a candle — Homo Sapiens is sure to be displaced by New Man. Unquote."

"I know you're asking, 'If the government knows — why doesn't it act?' The proof of these mutants' power is that the government knows — and does nothing. I have in my hand a list of 128 of these monsters who have plotted war, crime, poverty, communism, racial division — names known to the D.O.D. — but who still walk the Earth, planning our deaths."

"The chips are down — the government is in their power. The gulf between us and them is narrow — but we can never close it. Yet now — while their number is small — for our children's sake — we can root out and destroy them — before it's too late." (Laughter.)

"I think 128 is the number of genius-level employees in federal government," Gregory said.

"I wonder where he got that crazy idea," Nixon laughed.

"Maybe not so crazy," someone added. "It explains —"

"We interrupt for a statement from Senator

McCarthy." The familiar voice boomed: "Let me thank the American people for the telegrams pouring in. Many name — or report activities of — the New Men. Most asked for the 128 names — but the D.O.D. list is in my luggage." ("Of course," Stewart said.) "However, I can name one of the ringleaders. This man has degrees from Yale, Cambridge and the Sorbonne — an IQ of 250 plus — yet he's disguised himself as a menial. His name is Alexander Hamilton Jones — and he's living in the heart of our nation's government — masquerading as a bartender."

Glass shattered. "My god, that's me!"

Every eye turned to face the black man in the white coat — frozen behind the bar.

Shit, Sven thought, draining the screwdriver. What have I done? Timmy — Tail-gunner — he had crossed two wires that should never have touched. What would happen next?

*

"You can't fight it, Miltie," the girl on the flickering Magnavox was saying. "It's bigger than both of us." The star turned to his guests: "Dean, Jerry — help me. I'll do anything. Put a star on your dressing room — " "What dressing room?"

Sven took his steak off the Hotpoint, a Pabst from the Frigidaire, set both on the table (all their furniture was Colonial-style) — and shook an Old Gold ("for a treat — instead of a treatment") from the pack on the Maytag.

"That too. I'll even pay your salaries. I'll make it up to you some — " "Make-up? Did someone say 'make-up'?" A diminutive figure ran up and smacked the star with a huge powderpuff.

Sven carried his dinner into the living room, and settled back in an easy chair. JoAnn was at a Civil Defense meeting — so he was 'batching' it tonight.

Dancing cigarettes were replaced by news. "The big story — " the announcer said "— is the incredible public response to Senator McCarthy's claim last night that a conspiracy of mutants threatens to destroy mankind."

Sven had been so busy with problems on the new bipolar junction transistor — he had forgotten Tail-gunner's speech.

"Millions of phone calls, letters and telegrams — have flooded the Senate naming teachers, lawyers, scientists, authors, Mensa members — as mutants. Hundreds have lost jobs and been driven from their homes. Communities say they are afraid to take a chance."

Sven heard JoAnn open the front door and go in to change only dimly — beer and Old Gold were forgotten.

"A long line of people appeared before the Senator's committee — " Photo: Jammed Senate chamber "— to swear they had lost businesses, jobs, promotions, even wives to New Men. Farmers testified neighbors who prospered while they failed were mutants. Others claimed proof of mutant influence on government,

financial and social institutions."

Sven put down his steak untasted, groped blindly and lit a second Old Gold. He was numb with shock. It was too much like the "Fantasizer" hunts of his own age — how he escaped them, he had never known. How many sent to the front? How many shipped to labor camps?

"Grilled by the Senator was Alexander Hamilton Jones — an accused mutant leader." Film: Tail-gunner's flabby good-humor was now slit-eyed, porcine cruelty. "Isn't it true you think you are better than normal people?" Andrew was sweating. "No. I believe in democ —" "Didn't you write 'Something sets me apart from ordinary men'?" Andrew looked bewildered. "That was a college poem — it was abo —" Tail-gunner cut him off. "And isn't it —"

"Sven —" JoAnn stood in the doorway, wearing one of the diaphanous housecoats that were the rage — her body silhouetted through it by the light behind. A plume of smoke trailed from her nostrils; she held a martini in one hand. "Sven, I want —"

Sven turned to her in anguish. "Have you heard about Tail-gunner and this mutant thing? People denouncing neighbors — panicked over shadows. It's incredible — it's terrible — unreal. Can you believe it's happening?"

JoAnn moved forward, eyes reflective, sad. "If only you had said something like that to me earlier. If only you had said anything. We went out a lot and you made me laugh — when we were dating."

Sven cringed inside. It was true — when he had met JoAnn, he had known she was a quiet girl. But she had reminded him of Adele — and he had gone out of his way to charm her interest. After they were married, it had been easy to slip back into the habit of silence he'd learned during a lifetime under the watchful eye of CA.

He had wanted her to make an effort to see the real him — like Adele, Sven realized. But she wasn't Adele — he had wrecked JoAnn's life chasing a foolish dream. He seemed to wreck everything he touched.

And yet the night he met her — she had done all the talking. "Did you ever wonder why I was so talkative that first time?" she said, again seeming to read his thoughts. "You were the only person I'd ever met more withdrawn than I was. I wanted to bring you out of your shell."

"I'm sorry," was all he could say under the crushing weight of his wrongs.

JoAnn came closer — swaying over him. "Sven, I —" There was a plaintive longing he had never heard before.

Bing-bong. The clear, metallic sound froze them — a million unspoken thoughts winged along their glance.

Andrew stood on the porch. His face was no longer grizzled — it was aged. His suit was torn and blood was seeping from a small cut under one eye. "I have no one close in Washington — I had little idea where else to —"

"Come in." He hadn't expected it, but wasn't

surprised.

The living room was empty — JoAnn had gone to bed.

"This is madness." Andrew's black face gleaming with sweat. "They're investigating my entire family — uncles, aunts, cousins. Half have lost jobs. They have normal IQs — but because we're related, they're suspected of hiding their real IQs."

"What will you have to drink?" Sven said (aware of the irony) — filling his own glass with Hiram Walker.

"My brother's home was burned down." His eyes were haunted, horror-filled. "— Sorry, don't drink. Thank god they don't get radio where my mother lives. At her age —"

Sven drained his screwdriver, refilled the glass and lit another Old Gold. He offered the pack to Andrew.

"The Senator had a list of everyone I ever knew." The laughing face now sagged in despair. "—Thanks, don't smoke. He asked me if I didn't think it was funny so many had high IQs — or was I pretending I was too dumb to see that. He kept hounding at it — hounding."

(And Sven had thought their politics harmless!)

For a moment Andrew's eyes seemed to cross over into madness. "I'm used to taking heat for my color. I've been jailed in Biloxi and beaten in Boston. But my IQ..."

Sven could think of nothing to say — he leaned forward and put his hand on the man's knee reassuringly.

Andrew put his head in his hands. "I never heard of the New Men — and tomorrow the Senator says he has a witness who can prove I am one. . . . Oh god, what am I going to do?"

"For one thing," Sven said, "sleep in the den."

At that moment, a heavy, official pounding shook the front door. *Thought Police!* Sven shuddered. Then realized CA was far behind (or far ahead). The police of this era were saints in comparison — besides, he had nothing to fear from them — and it was probably only a neighbor.

But it wasn't neighbors or the Thought Police on his front porch — it was something far more dangerous. A sea of faces — sullen, suspicious, threatening, spreading into the freezing dark. A few Sven recognized — most were strangers. Sven knew — before they said anything — why they had come.

"We saw that mutant guy go in here." Sven could hear their collective sound, a sinister animal rustle.

Peress, the dentist from across the street, stood between a huge man wearing a coat and a sandy-haired man with faded eyes. Their breath steamed.

"What do you want?" Sven shivered in the cold playing for time (he had a sick sense of what was to come — but no idea what to do).

"We're the neighborhood Vigilance Committee," Peress said. "We just want to talk."

"Don't lie," the sandy-faced man said. "We plan to put an end to the danger him and his kind pose to real people — and we plan to start now."

The big man moved — his hand held a noosed rope.

Sven felt that hideous, helpless sense of unreality return. This can't be happening here, he thought. Not in the nineteen fifties, in the midst of orderly suburban Georgetown — in the Warrens of 2067 — but not here.

An ugly, menacing growl went up from the crowd. "Hang 'im now." "Quit stalling." "Bust in."

Sven was soaked with sweat despite the cold. Whatever happened, it would all be over before the police could arrive — if they weren't sympathetic to the committee. Suddenly he was back in the Warrens — and midnight visits from the Safety Committees. Sven knew what followed.

He had no intention of giving Andrew up. But he couldn't stop this mob — and there was JoAnn to think of. Tail-gunner, damn him, had created this mess (though Sven knew this wasn't true) — Tail-gunner should have to fix it.

Then — standing there in the icy October night, the yellow light of the porch lamp casting radiance down over a hate-filled world that had seemed so serene only a few hours ago — Sven saw how Tail-gunner might "fix" the situation, after all.

"You don't understand," Sven announced. "I'm a friend of the Senator's. This man is in my custody to make sure he's at the hearing. . . . You boys don't want to get me — or yourselves — in dutch with Congress."

The sandy-haired man frowned. The big man growled: "How do we know —"

"It's true," Peress said. "I've seen Tail-gunner here."

"Want to come in and phone the Senator?" Tail-gunner would probably like the idea of Andrew being in his "custody."

"Naw, that's okay," the sandy-haired man said. "We don't want trouble with Congress — that's the Justice Department. If he's under detention — that's different."

He turned to the crowd. "It's okay, men. This man's working for Tail-gunner Joe. The mutant's his prisoner."

Sven sighed in relief. He had dealt with a minor crisis — the major was yet to come. How was he to help Andrew — and the others — and undo the damage he had caused?

*

Sven and Andrew sat facing Tail-gunner in a vast, smoky chamber packed with spectators, reporters — and witnesses eager to testify to the existence of mutants. Sven saw Joe Alsop scribbling notes, Senator Rankin, the junior senator from California with Mrs. Kennedy — and JoAnn, squeezed between Peress and an elderly woman in a veiled hat.

Throughout the morning Andrew's teachers, schoolmates and friends had been quizzed about his brilliance and behavior. Many believed these were so unusual they could only be explained by mutation. Those who did not, received a merciless verbal beating. "Andy's bright," said his fifth grade teacher, "but he's no more —" Tail-gunner. "Didn't you say he could 'almost read' your mind?" "I only meant —" Tail-gunner:

"Didn't you once ask how 'a woman like that could produce a child like Andy'?" "Yes, but —" Tail-gunner: "That's all."

Now, with the groundwork out of the way, Tail-gunner sprang his key witness. "Will William W. Williams take his place before this hearing, please."

A dapper, medium-sized black man in a silky grey suit strode up, was sworn in, and sat down before a microphone.

("My god," Andrew whispered. "That's Weasel Willy — he'll do anything for money.")

"Now Mr. Williams," Tail-gunner, was his genial, easy-going self, "when did you first hear of the New Men?"

Williams squirmed in his chair. "I guess 'bout — jus' befo' the war. They 'vited me ta join count'a Ize so smart." (Sven waited for the laughter — surely people could tell how ridiculous this was.)

"And just what were the aims of the New Men, Mr. Williams?" Tail-gunner purred.

"They waz a secret organization that was super-smart 'cause their fo'ks waz hit by x-rays. They waz gonna 'sterminate reg'lar fo'ks and take over the world."

An audible gasp ran around the room. Satisfaction narrowed Tail-gunner's eyes.

"And who were the leaders of the New Men?"

"Ize don' know all of 'ems — but I do know one — and their he sits — Mr. Andrew Jacks'n Jones."

Even though it was what everyone had been expecting — the chamber broke into commotion: flashbulbs popped, reporters dashed for phones, the chairman pounded for order.

"Now," the clerk announced, "will Mr. Andrew Jackson Jones take his place before this hearing."

Andrew complied — looking sober and responsible in a brown suit and tie.

Again, Tail-gunner's whole demeanor changed in an instant. His eyes became pockets of malice, his fleshy face brutal, coarse. "Mr. Jones, let's go back to the question."

"According to committee rules," Andrew interrupted, "I'm allowed to read an opening state —"

"You don't need an opening statement," Tail-gunner cut in. "Just answer one question."

"I want to read —"

"Just answer 'yes' or 'no': how do you explain —"

"I am not now — and never have been a member of the New Men — nor had I ever heard of the New Men until —"

"Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones. Answer this question. You are ordered to answer this question — or I am going to keep you here as long as it takes."

Andrew, wearily: "All right — what is your question?"

"Your parents and relatives are normal. How do you account for your IQ — if you aren't a mutant? Do you know the odds against someone having an IQ like yours

naturally are more than one in one billion?"

"Senator many people with high IQs are born to —"

"Just answer my question."

Andrew frowned. "What question?"

Tail-gunner sneered: "Don't tell me that someone with an IQ as large as yours — can't understand a simple question —" Sneeringly: "But I'll repeat it: if you are not a mutant — how do you explain your billion-to-one IQ?"

Andrew looked around, desperate, pleading — surely, his eyes said, everyone must see the absurdity of this. "I — I can't, Senator. No one can explain why —"

"You can't explain it — that's all." Tail-gunner wheeled, strode to his table, picked up a folder, whirled accusingly. "Now let's take the matter of your disguise."

"Senator, I was never disguised —"

"Mr. Jones — your *vitae*: Degree in Chemistry, Sorbonne 1938; Biochemistry, Cambridge, 1947. Grants and fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Institute, etc." Tail-gunner paused. "Is that accurate?"

"Yes... but —"

Tail-gunner snapped the folder shut. "Yet, we find you pretending to be a bartender — affecting the accent of an ignorant coon — and you don't call that a disguise?"

"Senator," desperately, "I needed a job —"

Tail-gunner turned in a fury. "Are you saying a man with your credentials can't get a better job than bartender in the U.S. of A. — just because of his color?"

Too late Andrew — and Sven — saw Tail-gunner's paper. Whichever answer Andrew gave — he alienated the public and the papers. "I... Senator this is craz —"

Tail-gunner, boring in: "Are you aware that the *Daily Worker*, the organ of the Communist Party, says that black men are denied opportunity in America... You don't endorse the official position of the Communist Party — do you?"

Andrew, indignantly: "Of course not —"

"Which is it, Mr. Jones? Are you a mutant — or a Red?"

Andrew licked his lips and looked around appealingly. "I — this is ridic —"

Tail-gunner towered above him, thundering. "Are you a mutant — or a Red, Mr. Jones — answer the question!"

Andrew's eyes moved wildly seeking a way out — but there was none.

Tail-gunner's voice lisped with vituperative malice. "A mutant — or a Red?" he shouted.

The farce had gone far enough, Sven thought. He might have waited too long already.

"Tail-gunner —" Sven tapped the microphone, his words echoing around him. "— Tail-gunner? Can I say something?"

In one of those baffling changes of mood, Tail-gunner laughed. "Sure, Sven — go ahead. We're drinking buddies."

Sven beckoned — JoAnn led the veiled, elderly

woman up.

"This," Sven announced, sweaty, faint and sick under the lights — aware of the million eyes upon him — "is Mrs. Eulalie Jones." The wrinkled black woman unpinned her hat and veil. "Mrs. Jones is eighty-seven and the mother of Andrew Jackson Jones. She has never left Chester Gap, West Virginia before — and has never been exposed to radiation."

"Thayt's ri," the faint voice wavered. "Andy's ma boy — an' Ah nev' ren nair this heir radimation."

Again flashbulbs popped, reporters scurried to the phones — and the spectators were gaveled into silence.

"That's a lie!" Tail-gunner shouted, waving a fistful of papers. "— This woman's no more his mother than I am."

The woman staggered, every eye on her.

"Mr. Jones' real mother is Hazel Jones of Greensboro," Tail-gunner stalked forward, glaring — "and she was X-rayed for a broken bone six months before Andrew was born. This woman —" he pointed and she took a trembling step back "— is a fake — and a former streetwalker. And I have copies of her birth certificate to prove it!" Tail-gunner thundered — shaking the papers in her face.

The woman's watery eyes blinked — her mouth opened — she seemed to be trying to speak. Suddenly her eyes rolled upward — Sven's hand stretched out, JoAnn moved forward — but before anyone could reach her — she gave way at the knees like a doll.

Reporters and photographers rushed forward.

Tail-gunner, for once — was caught totally by surprise.

Sven snatched the papers from Tail-gunner's hand, scanned them quickly. "Senator —" Sven held the papers where everyone could see "— it might interest people to know this is nothing more than a series of unpaid laundry bills —" Sven thrust them into the hands of several reporters. "And this woman — as you very well know — is Andrew Jackson Jones' mother — she has never been exposed to radiation — Mr. Jones is no mutant — there is no mutant conspiracy — it's an idea you got from Timmy Alsop while drunk."

Tail-gunner had turned his back to Sven and begun to rummage through a briefcase.

Sven leaned closer to the microphone — he wanted Tail-gunner to hear every word — he wanted everyone to hear. "Tail-gunner, until this moment, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. Little did I dream that you could be so low as to do an injury to that saintly grandmother. Have you no sense of decency, Tail-gunner? At long last — have you no sense of decency left? If she lives — she and her son — and thousands of others — will always bear a scar — needlessly inflicted by you. If it lay in my power to forgive you — I would. But your forgiveness will have to come from a higher power. Let us trouble these two no further, Tail-gunner — you've done enough."

Every eye turned upon the junior senator from

Wisconsin — and there was scorn and disapproval in every eye. Then the room exploded in a frenzy.

That, for Sven, was luckiest of all.

No one heard Andrew, kneeling over his mother, hiss coldly at Sven: "How could you, you son-of —"

Or saw one eye open in that wrinkled face as she whispered, "Hush up, Andy. White folks ain't the only one's can pull th' flim-flam."

CODA

Tail-gunner showed up at his barbecue the next weekend. Sven couldn't believe it when he heard the familiar, genial, laugh coming from his den.

Sven set his drink aside, ground out his cigarette, handed his spatula to a surprised Humphrey, and stalked out of the kitchen. (He had no idea until later that he was shaking and white with rage.)

He seemed to be moving through a smoky, unreal world of reckless conversation.

"We're a welfare state. People are against it for others — but they want that pension, crop support, subsidy, scholarship or grant for themselves."

"First China — then Korea — then Viet Nam or Thailand — they'll fall like dominos if we don't do something."

Every step of the way Sven could feel his rage at the fifties building. They appeared so orderly, bland, serene on the surface — but beneath that surface was all the greed, heedlessness and cruelty that underlay the twenties, his own time, and all the other ages of humanity. If it weren't for JoAnn, there would be nothing to hold him here.

"I've just read the preliminary Congressional report on subversion in government. Out of the millions whose files were combed and the thousands who were grilled, only seventy-five were ever accused of Communist activities. Only two were brought to trial."

"In a hardening of attitude, Secretary Acheson announced a state of 'Cold War' exists between the U.S. and Russia. Factories across the nation began to close today as the coal strike continued. United Mine Workers head, John L. Lewis, refused to predict when the strike might end. Miners have remained on strike, defying courts and Lewis himself."

Sven came on the target of his anger the way he had the first time: Tail-gunner was holding court behind a laughing crowd of men, lounging in one of Sven's chairs.

"Yo' sho' took a beatin' in the papers this morning," Rankin was saying.

"Did you see the *Washington Post*?" Someone whistled.

Tail-gunner laughed without embarrassment, gesturing with a cigarette as he drained a highball. "I wouldn't call it a vote of confidence — but I don't feel I've been lynched."

"Reds. You should have gone after those atheists,"

Father Walsh interrupted. "China didn't fall by accident. The same State Department traitors who betrayed us at Yalta — betrayed China. The whole D.O.S. is Red. Someone has to root them out before the whole world ends up Red."

Sven strode through the crowd, opened his mouth — "Hi Sven," Tail-gunner's eyes crinkled in genuine delight. "I've been wondering when you would come by. What the hell are you trying to do — avoid me?"

Sven stood there for a moment — feeling like a fool. What was there he could say to a man like this? Tail-gunner was as unaware of his own cruelty or the pain others suffered as if he were an inhuman mutant himself. Whatever Sven said would roll off Tail-gunner's back with that easy, liquored laugh.

As for the others, what could he tell them? That they were children playing with matches — worrying over all the wrong dangers while America headed straight down the crapper?

Sven turned on his heel — and walked away.

Tail-gunner's response confirmed everything Sven believed. "What's eating him?" Tail-gunner said.

Sven went toward the house.

"Don't you get it, Joe?" the rabbit man was saying. "Chambers, Larsen and Elizabeth Bentley — they were all paid informers."

Joe looked up, gritted his teeth. "Owen, no agency of the American government would ever sink that low. The practice of putting political informers on government payrolls has been condemned since Tacitus. As turncoats, their characters are suspect — and what happens when they have told all they know but want to continue their income?"

Owen laughed, tossed back a highball.

"Oh, well, it's something you'll never have to worry about," Joe said. "Everyone knows the Lattimores are okay."

"Hey, Sven. . ."

He was in no mood to talk to anyone. He needed to be alone — to think. The party could get along without him for a while.

"What do you know about the spy trials and loyalty boards? Peress says it's a Republican plot to discredit the Democrats and purge government and schools of those with opposing political views. He says the monied interests that run the country panicked when the depression revealed their financial misdealings, and Roosevelt was elected to curb them. He says their newspapers and magazines set out to smear FDR by branding his policies 'socialism' and 'communism' — and those who supported him as secret Bolsheviks. They started a campaign based not on acts — but treason; not on deeds — which are subject to proof or disproof — but on predilections of the mind. For what traitor would admit his treason? So we came to depend on the turncoat who had been inside the conspiracy, supposedly discovered conscience, and decided to tell all — truthfully, of course. He says that in its entire history, the

Un-American Activities Committee grilled thousands of supposed Reds, but never a single Nazi...What do you think?"

"It would explain why all our allies are right-wing dictators."

As Sven opened the bedroom door he bumped into JoAnn. She was tucking her blouse inside her skirt, and adjusting a bra strap — her hair was disheveled, she was breathing hard. The bed beyond her was dented.

Her eyes met his.

They both knew what had happened. In a way, Sven felt relieved. He had no more ties left to this era — he could leave without guilt.

"Oh Sven —" she said, reaching out to touch his cheek. "Poor Sven. I didn't mean for you to find out this way — but I want a divorce."

"Who is it?"

Sven's mind flashed back over the last few weeks — reviewed who had been where when. "Kennedy," he said. "The senator from Massachusetts?"

JoAnn laughed. "John Kennedy? Good god, no. He's too stuck on himself."

Sven frowned. Who?"

"Dick," she said it as if it ought to be obvious.

"Nixon?" he said incredulously. "Why?"

"He makes me laugh," she said simply.

Sven had been right. There was no place for him here any more. No place for him anywhere — or

anywhen. Just by being here he had brought two elements together that would never otherwise have met — and the results had been disaster.

Sven slipped out of the house, moved toward the garage. The Transverter was there. He had no idea where he was going. He only knew he could remain here no longer.

"Governor Talmadge declared Georgia will fight the suit by Negro parents under the 14th Amendment to equalize education in the state's schools. Following successful convictions of the top ten of the U.S. Communist Party, Attorney General McGrath indicted officers of Amtorg Trading, Russia's purchasing agency in this country, for failure to register as foreign agents."

"Security must," Sven heard someone say as he slipped out the gate, "be one object of a good society but other and more important objects are productivity, excellence, creativeness, adventure, honor and the chance to take a chance."

—JEAN MARIE STINE

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This story is dedicated to: Sturgeon, Gold, Costello, and Tail-gunner Joe. Sven, JoAnn, Gregory, Belinda and Timmy Alsop, Andrew Jackson Jones, Weasel Willy, and of course Eulalie Jones are fictional. As usual all other characters are real, and do and speak exactly as they did. Most other dialogue is paraphrased from publications of the period.



Who knows what the
Book of Dreams says?

I slept on the Book of
Dreams, but it was
very uncomfortable.

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ME AND MY SHADOW

By MIKE RESNICK

Illustrated by Metzger

It all began when—
No. Strike that.

I don't know when it all began. Probably I never will.

But it began the second time when a truck backfired and I hit the sidewalk with the speed and grace of an athlete, which surprised the hell out of me since I've been a very *un*athletic businessman ever since the day I was born — or born again, depending on your point of view.

I got up, brushed myself off, and looked around. About a dozen pedestrians (though it felt like a hundred) were staring at me, and I could tell what each of them was thinking: Is this guy just some kind of nut, or has he maybe been Erased? And if he's been Erased, have I ever met him before? Do I owe him?

Of course, even if we *had* met before, they couldn't recognize me now. I know. I've spent almost three years trying to find out who I was before I got Erased — but along with what they did to my brain, they gave me a new face and wiped my fingerprints clean. I'm a brand new man: two years, eleven months, and seventeen days old. I am (fanfare and trumpets, please!)* William Jordan***. Not a real catchy name, I'll admit, but it's the only one I've got these days.

I had another name once. They told me not to worry about it, that all my memories had been expunged and that I couldn't dredge up a single fact no matter how hard I tried, not even if I took a little Sodium-P from a hypnotist, and after a few weeks passed I had to agree with them — which didn't mean that I stopped trying.

Erasures *never* stop trying.

Maybe the doctors and technicians at the Institute are right. Maybe I'm better off not knowing. Maybe the knowledge of what I did would drive the new improved me to suicide. But let me tell you: whatever I did, whatever *any* of us did (oh, yes, I speak to other Erasures; we spend a lot of time hanging around the newstape morgues and Missing Persons Bureaus and aren't all that hard to spot), it would be easier to live with the details than the uncertainty.

Example:

"Good day to you, Madam. Lovely weather we're having. Please excuse a delicate inquiry, but did I rape your infant daughter four years ago? Sodomize your sons? Slit your husband open from crotch to chin? Oh, no reason in particular; I was just curious."

Do you begin to see the problem?

Of course, they tell us that we're special, that we're not simply run-of-the-mill criminals and fiends; the jails are full of *them*.

Ah, fun and games at the Institute! It's quite an experience.

We cherish your individuality, they say as they painfully extract all my memories. (Funny: the pain lingers long after the memories are gone.)

Society needs men with your drive and ambition, they smile as they shoot about eighteen zillion volts of electricity through my spasmodically-jerking body.

You had the guts to buck the system, they point out as they shred my face and give me a new one.

With drive like yours there's no telling how far you can go now that we've imprinted a new personality and a new set of ethics onto that magnificent libido, they agree as they try to decide whether to school me as a kennel attendant or perhaps turn me into an encyclopedia salesman. (They compromise and metamorphose me into an accountant.)

You lucky man, you've got a new name and face and memories and five hundred dollars in your pocket and you've still got your drive and ambition, they say as they excruciatingly insert a final memory block.

Now go out and knock them dead, they tell me.

Figuratively speaking, they add hastily.

Oh, one last thing, they say as they shove me out the door of the Institute. *We're pretty busy here, William Jordan, so don't come back unless it's an emergency. A BONA FIDE emergency.*

"But where am I to go?" I ask. "What am I to do?"

You'll think of something, they assure me. *After all, you had the brains and guts to buck our social system. Boy, do we wish we were like you! Now beat it; we've got work to do — or do you maybe think you're the only anti-social misanthrope with delusions of grandeur who ever got Erased?*

And the wild part is that they were right: most Erasures make out just fine. Strange as it sounds, we really *do* have more drive than the average man, the guy who just wants to hold off his creditors until he retires and his pension comes through. We'll take more risks, make quicker decisions, fight established trends more vigorously. We're a pretty gritty little group, all right — except that none of us knows why he was Erased.

In fact, I didn't have my first hint until the truck backfired. (See, I'll bet you thought I had forgotten all about it. Not a chance, friend. Erasures don't forget things — at least, not once they've left the Institute. What most Erasures do is spend vast portions of their new lives trying to *remember* things. Futilely.)

Well, my memory may have been wiped clean, but my instincts were still in working order, and what they told me was that I was a little more used to being shot at than the average man on the street. Not much to go on, to be sure, but at least it implied that the nature of my sin leaned more toward physical violence than, say, Wall

Street tycoonery with an eye toward sophisticated fraud.

So I went to the main branch of the Public Library, started a quarter of an hour on the Master Computer, and rented popping in the questions.

LIST ALL CRIMINALS STANDING SIX FEET TWO INCHES WHO WERE APPREHENDED AND CONVICTED IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

***CLASSIFIED.

That wasn't surprising. It had been classified that last fifty times I had asked. But, undaunted (Erasures are rarely daunted), I continued.

LIST ALL MURDERS COMMITTED BY PISTOL IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

The list appeared on the screen, sixty names per second.

STOP.

The computer stopped, while I tried to come up with a more limiting question.

WITHOUT REVEALING THEIR IDENTITIES, TELL ME HOW MANY CRIMINALS WERE CONVICTED OF MULTIPLE PISTOL MURDERS IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

***CLASSIFIED. Then it burped and added: NICE TRY, THOUGH.

THANK YOU. HAS ANY ERASURE EVER DISCOVERED EITHER HIS ORIGINAL IDENTITY OR THE REASON HE WAS ERASED?

NOT YET.

DOES THAT IMPLY IT IS POSSIBLE?

NEGATIVE.

THEN IT IS IMPOSSIBLE?

NEGATIVE.

THEN WHAT THE HELL DID YOU MEAN?

ONLY THAT NO IMPLICATION WAS INTENDED.

I checked my wristwatch. Five minutes left.

I AM AN ERASURE, I began.

I WOULD NEVER HAVE GUESSED.

Just what I needed — sarcasm from a computer. They're making them too damned smart these days.

RECENTLY I REACTED INSTINCTIVELY TO A SOUND VERY SIMILAR TO THAT MADE BY A PISTOL BEING FIRED, ALTHOUGH I HAD NO CONSCIOUS REASON TO DO SO. WOULD THAT IMPLY THAT GUNFIRE PLAYED AN IMPORTANT PART IN MY LIFE PRIOR TO THE TIME I WAS ERASED?

***CLASSIFIED.

CLASSIFIED, NOT NEGATIVE?

THAT IS CORRECT.

I got up with three minutes left on my time.

My next stop was Doubleday's on Fifth Avenue. The sign in the window boasted half a million microdots per cubic yard, which meant that they had one hell of a collection of literature crammed into their single

ten-by-fifty-foot aisle.

I went straight to the True Crime section, but gave up almost immediately when I saw the sheer volume of True Crime that occurred each and every day in Manhattan.

I called in sick, then hunted up a shooting gallery in the telephone directory. I made an appointment, rode the Midtown sidewalk up to the front door, rented a pistol, and went downstairs to the soundproofed target range in the basement.

It took me a couple of minutes to figure out how to insert the ammunition clip, an inauspicious beginning. Then I hefted the gun, first in one hand and then the other, hoping that something I did would feel familiar. No luck. I felt awkward and foolish, and the next couple of minutes didn't make me feel any better. I took dead aim at the target hanging some fifty feet away and missed it completely. I held the pistol with both hands and missed it again. I missed it right-handed and left-handed. I missed it with my right eye closed, I missed it with my left eye closed, I missed it with both eyes open.

Well, if the only thing I had going for me was my instinct, I decided to give that instinct a chance. I threw myself on the floor, rolled over twice, and fired off a quick round — and shot out the overhead light.

So much, I told myself, for instinct. Obviously the man I used to be was more at home ducking bullets than aiming them.

I left the gallery, hunted up a couple of Erased Friends, and asked them if they'd ever experienced anything like my little flash of *deja vu*. One of them thought it was hilarious — they may have made him safe, but I have my doubts about whether they made him sane — and the other confessed to certain vague stirrings whenever she heard a John Philip Sousa march, which wasn't exactly the answer I was looking for.

I stopped off for lunch at a local soya joint, spent another fruitless fifteen minutes in the library with my friend the computer, and went back to my brownstone condo to think things out. The whole time I was riding the sidewalk home I kept shadow-boxing and dancing away from imaginary enemies and reaching for a nonexistent revolver under my left arm, but nothing felt natural or even comfortable. After I got off the sidewalk and walked the final half block to my front door, I decided to see if I could pick my lock, but I gave it up after about ten minutes, which was probably just as well since a passing cop was giving me the fish-eye.

I poured myself a stiff drink — Erasures' homes differ in locale and decor and many other respects, but you'll find liquor in all of them, as well as cheap memory courses and the Collected Who's Who in Organized Crime tapes — and tried, for the quadrillionth time, to dredge up some image from my past. The carnage of war, the screams and supplications of rape victims, the moans of old men and children lying sliced and bleeding in Central Park, all were grist for my

mental mill — and all felt unfamiliar.

So I couldn't shoot and I couldn't pick locks and I couldn't remember. All that was on the one hand.

On the other hand was just one single solitary fact: I had ducked.

But somewhere deep down in my gut (certainly not in my brain) I knew, I *knew*, that the man I used to be had screamed wordlessly in my ear (or somewhere) to hit the deck before I got my/his/our damned fool heads blown off.

This was contrary to everything they had told me at the Institute. I wasn't supposed to be in communication with my former self. Even emergency conferences while bullets flew through the air were supposed to be impossible.

The more I thought about it, the more I decided that this definitely qualified as a bonafide Institute-visiting emergency. So I put on my jacket and left the condo and started off for the Institute. I didn't have any luck flagging down a cab — like frightened herbivores, New York cabbies hide at the first hint of nightfall — so I started walking over to the East River sidewalk.

I had gone about two blocks when a grungy little man with water eyes, a pock-marked face, and a very crooked nose jumped out at me from between two buildings, a wicked-looking knife in his hand.

Well, three years without being robbed in Manhattan is like flying 200 missions over Iraq or Paraguay or whoever we're mad at this month. You figure your number is up and you stoically take what's coming to you.

So I handed him my wallet, but there was only a single small bill in it, plus a bunch of credit cards geared to my voiceprint, and he suddenly threw the wallet on the ground and went berserk, ranting and raving about how I had cheated him.

I started backing away, which seemed to enrage him further, because he screamed something obscene and raced toward me with his knife raised above his head, obviously planning to plunge it into my neck or chest.

I remember thinking that of all the places to die, Second Avenue between 35th and 36th Streets was perhaps the very last one I'd have chosen. I remember wanting to yell for help but being too scared to force a sound out. I remember seeing the knife plunge down at me as if in slow motion.

And then, the next thing I knew, he was lying on his back, both his arms broken and his nose spouting blood like a fountain, and I was kneeling down next to him, just about to press the point of the knife into his throat.

I froze, trying to figure out what had happened, while deep inside me a voice — not — angry, not bloodthirsty, but soft and seductive — crooned: *Do it, do it.*

"Don't kill me!" moaned the man, writhing beneath my hands. "Please don't kill me!"

You'll enjoy it, murmured the voice. *You'll see.*

I remained motionless for another moment, then

dropped the knife and ran north, paying no attention to the traffic signals and not slowing down until I practically barreled into a bus that was blocking the intersection at 42nd Street.

Fool! whispered the voice. *Didn't I save your life? Trust me.*

Or maybe it wasn't the voice at all. Maybe I was just imagining what it would say if it were there.

At any rate, I decided not to go to the Institute after all. I had a feeling that if I walked in looking breathless and filthy and with the mugger's blood all over me, they'd just Erase me again before I could tell them what had happened.

So I went back home, took a quick Dryshower, hunted up Dr. Brozgold's number in the book, and called him.

"Yes?" he said after the phone had chimed twice. He looked just as I remembered him: tall and cadaverous, with a black mustache and bushy eyebrows, the kind of man who could put on a freshly-pressed suit and somehow manage to look rumpled.

"I'm an Erasure," I said, coming right to the point. "You worked on me."

"I'm afraid we have a faulty connection here," he said, squinting at his monitor. "I'm not receiving a video transmission."

"That's because I put a towel over my camera," I told him.

"I assume that this is an emergency?" he asked dryly, cocking one of those large, thick, dishevelled eyebrows.

"It is," I said.

"Well, Mr. X — I hope you don't mind if I call you that — what seems to be the problem?"

"I almost killed a man tonight."

"Really?" he said.

"Doesn't that surprise you?"

"Not yet," he replied, placing his hands before him and juxtaposing his fingers. "I'll need some details first. Were you driving a car or robbing a bank or what?"

"I almost killed this man with my bare hands."

"Well, whoever you are, Mr. X, and whoever you were," he said, stroking his ragged mustache thoughtfully, "I think I can assure you that *almost* killing people probably wasn't your specialty."

"You don't understand," I said doggedly. "I used karate or kung fu or something like that, and I don't know any karate or kung fu."

"Who is this?" he demanded suddenly.

"Never mind," I said. "What I want to know is: What the hell is happening to me?"

"Look, I really can't help you without knowing your case history," he said, trying to keep the concern out of his voice and not quite succeeding.

"I don't have a history," I said. "I'm a brand new man, remember?"

"Then what have you got against telling me who you are?"

"I'm trying to find out who I am!" I said hotly. "A little voice has been telling me that killing people feels good."

"If you'll present yourself at the Institute first thing in the morning, I'll do what I can," he said nervously.

"I know what you can do," I snapped. "You've already done it to me. I want to know if it's being undone."

"Absolutely not!" he said emphatically. "Whoever you are, your memory has been totally eradicated. No Erasure has ever developed even partial recall."

"Then how did I mangle a professional mugger who was attacking me with a knife?"

"The human body is capable of many things when placed under extreme duress," he replied in a carefully-measured tones.

"I'm not talking about jumping ten feet in the air or running fifty yards in three seconds when you're being chased by a wild animal! I'm talking about crippling an armed opponent with three precision blows."

"I really can't answer you on the spur of the moment," he said. "If you'll just come down to the Institute and ask for me, I'll—"

"You'll what?" I demanded. "Erase a little smudge that you overlooked the first time?"

"If you won't give me your name and you won't come to the Institute," he said, "just what is it you want from me?"

"I want to know what's happening."

"So you said," he commented dryly.

"And I want to know who I was."

"You know we can't tell you that," he said. Then he paused and smiled ingratiatingly into the camera. "Of course, we might make an exception in this case, given the nature of your problem. But we can't do that unless we know who you are now."

"What assurances have I that you won't Erase me again?"

"You have my word," he said with a fatherly smile.

"You probably gave me your word the last time, too," I said.

"This conversation is becoming tedious, Mr. X. I can't help you without knowing who you are. In all likelihood nothing at all out of the ordinary has happened or is happening to you. And if indeed you are developing a new criminal persona, I have no doubt that we'll be meeting before too long anyway. So if you have nothing further to say, I really do have other things to do." He paused, then looked sharply into the camera. "What's really disturbing you? If you are actually experiencing some slight degree of recall, why should that distress you? Isn't that what all you Erasures are always hoping for?"

"The voice," I said.

"What about the voice?" he demanded.

"I don't know whether to believe it or not."

"The one that tells you to kill people?"

"It sounds like it *knows*," I said softly. "It sounds

convincing."

"Oh, Lord!" he whispered, and hung up the phone.

"Are you still there?" I asked the voice.

There was no answer, but I really didn't expect any. There was no one around to kill.

Suddenly I began to feel constricted, like the walls were closing in on me and the air was getting too thick to breathe, so I put my jacket back on and went out for a walk, keeping well clear of Second Avenue.

I stayed away from the busier streets and stuck to the residential areas — as residential as you can get in Manhattan, anyway — and spent a couple of hours just wandering aimlessly while trying to analyze what was happening to me.

Two trucks backfired, but I didn't duck either time. A huge black man with a knife handle clearly visible above his belt walked by and gave me a long hard look, but I didn't disarm him. A police car cruised by, but I felt no urge to run.

In fact, I had just about convinced myself that Dr. Brozgold wasn't humoring me after all but was absolutely right about my having an overactive imagination, when a cheaply-dressed blonde hooker stepped out of a doorway and gave me the eye.

This one, whispered the voice.

I stopped dead in my tracks, terribly confused.

Trust me, it crooned.

The hooker smiled at me and, as if in a trance, I returned the smile and let her lead me upstairs to her sparsely-furnished room.

Patience, cautioned the voice. *Not too fast. Enjoy.*

She locked the door behind us.

What if she screams, I asked myself. We're on the fourth floor. How will I get away?

Relax, said the voice, all smooth and mellow. *First things first. You'll get away, never fear. I'll take care of you.*

The hooker was naked now. She smiled at me again, murmured something unintelligible, then came over and started unbuttoning my shirt.

I smashed a thumb into her left eye, heard bones cracking as I drove a fist into her rib cage, listened to her scream as I brought the edge of my hand down on the back of her neck.

Then there was silence.

It was fabulous! moaned the voice. *Just fabulous!* Suddenly it became solicitous. *Was it good for you, too?*

I waited a moment for my breathing to return to normal, for the flush of excitement to pass, or at least fade a little.

"Yes," I said aloud. "Yes. I enjoyed it."

I told you, said the voice. *They may have changed your memories, but they can't change your soul. You and I have always enjoyed it.*

"Do we just kill women?" I asked, curious.

I don't remember, admitted the voice.

"Then how do you know we had to kill this one?"

I know them when I see them, the voice assured me.

I mulled that over while I went around tidying up the room, rubbing the doorknob with my handkerchief, trying to remember if I had touched anything else.

They took away your fingerprints, said the voice. Why bother?

"So they don't know they're looking for an Erasure," I said, giving the room a final examination and then walking out the door.

I went home, put the towel back over the vidiphone camera, and called Dr. Brozgold.

"You again?" he said when he saw that he wasn't receiving a picture.

"Yes," I said. "I've thought about what you said, and I'll come in tomorrow morning."

"At the Institute?" he asked, looking tremendously relieved.

"Right. Nine o'clock sharp," I replied. "If you're not there when I arrive, I'm leaving."

"I'll be there," he promised.

I hung up the vidiphone, checked out his address in the directory, and walked out the door.

Smart, said the voice admiringly as I walked the 22 blocks to Brozgold's apartment. I would never have thought of this.

"That's probably why they caught you," I whispered into the cold night air.

It took me just under an hour to reach Brozgold's place. (They turn the sidewalks off at nine o'clock to save money.) Somehow I had known that he'd be in one of the century-old four-floor apartment buildings; any guy who dressed like he did and forgot to comb his hair wasn't about to waste money on a high-rise to impress his friends. I found his apartment number, then walked around to the back, clambered up the rickety wooden stairs to the third floor, checked out a number of windows, and knew I had the right place when I came to a kitchen with about fifty books piled on the floor and four days' worth of dishes in the sink. I couldn't jimmy this lock any better than my own, but the door was one of the old wooden types and I finally threw a shoulder against it and broke it.

"Who's there?" demanded Brozgold, racing out of his bedroom in his pajamas and looking even more unkempt than usual.

"Hi," I said with a cheerful smile, shoving him back into the bedroom. "Remember me?"

I closed the door behind us, just to be on the safe side. The room smelled of stale tobacco, or maybe it was just stale clothing in his closet. His furniture — a dresser, a writing desk, a double bed, a couple of nightstands, and a chair — had cost him a bundle, but they hadn't seen a coat of polish, or even a dust rag, since the day they'd been delivered.

He was staring at me, eyes wide, a dawning look of recognition on his face. "You're...ah...Jurgins? Johnson? I can't remember the name on the spur of the moment. You're the one who's been calling me?"

"I am," I said, pushing him onto the chair. "And it's

William Jordan."

"Jordan. Right." He looked flustered, like he wasn't fully awake yet. "What are you doing here, Jordan? I thought we were meeting at the Institute tomorrow morning."

"I know you did," I answered him. "I wanted to make sure that all your security was down there so we could have a private little chat right here and now."

He stood up. "Now you listen to me, Jordan—"

I pushed him back down, hard.

"That's what I came here for," I said. "And the first thing I want to listen to is the reason I was Erased."

"You were a criminal," he said coldly. "You know that."

"What crime did I commit?"

"You know I can't tell you that!" he yelled, trying to hide his mounting fear beneath a blustering exterior. "Now get the hell out of here and—"

"How many people did I kill with my bare hands?" I asked pleasantly.

"What?"

"I just killed a woman," I said. "I enjoyed it. I mean, I really enjoyed it. Right at this moment I'm trying to decide how much I'd like killing a doctor."

"You're crazy!" he snapped.

"As a matter of fact," I replied. "I have a certificate stating that the State of New York considers me to be absolutely sane." I grinned. "Guess who signed it?"

"Go away!" he yelled.

"As soon as you tell me what I want to know."

"I can't!"

"Are you still with me?" I whispered under my breath.

Right here, said the voice.

"Take over at the proper moment or I'm going to break my hand," I told it.

Ready when you are, it replied.

"Perhaps you need a demonstration of my skill and my sincerity," I said to Brozgold as I walked over to the dresser.

I lifted my hand high above my head and started bringing it down toward the dull wooden surface. I winced just before impact, but it didn't hurt a bit — and an instant later the top of the dresser and the first two drawers were split in half.

"Thanks," I whispered.

Any time.

"That could just as easily have been you," I said, turning back to Brozgold. "In fact, if you don't tell me what I need to know, it *will* be you."

"You'll kill me anyway," he said, shaking with fear but blindly determined to stick to his guns.

"I'll kill you if you *don't* tell me," I said. "If you do, I promise I won't harm you."

"What's the promise of a killer worth?" he said bitterly.

"You're the one who gave me my sense of honor," I pointed out. "Do you go around manufacturing liars?"

"No. But I don't go around manufacturing killers, either."

"I just want to know who I was and what I did," I repeated patiently. "I don't want to do it again. I just need some facts to fight off this damned voice."

Well, I like that, said the voice.

"I can't," repeated Brozgold.

"Sure you can," I said, taking a couple of steps toward him.

"It won't do you any good," he said, on the verge of tears now. "Everything about you, every last detail, has been classified. You won't be able to follow up on anything I know."

"Maybe we won't have to," I said. "How many people did I kill?"

"I can't."

I reached over to the little writing desk and brought my hand down. It split in two.

"How many?" I repeated, glaring at him.

"Seventeen!" he screamed, tears running down his face.

"Seventeen?" I repeated wonderingly. Even I was surprised that I had managed to amass so many. "Who were they? Men? Women?" He didn't answer, so I took another step toward him and added menacingly, "Doctors?"

"No!" he said quickly. "Not doctors. Never doctors!"

"Then who?"

"Whoever they paid you to kill!" he finally blurted out.

"I was a hit man?"

He nodded.

"I must have been very good at it to kill seventeen people," I said thoughtfully. "How did they finally catch me?"

"Your girlfriend turned state's evidence. She knew you had been hired to kill Carlo Castinerra—"

"The politician?" I interrupted.

"Yes. So the police staked him out and nailed you. You blundered right into their trap."

I shook my head sadly. "That's what I get for trusting people. And *this*," I added, bringing the edge of my hand down on his neck and producing a loud snapping noise, "is what you get."

That was unethical, said my little voice. *You promised not to hurt him if he told you what you wanted to know.*

"We trusted someone once, and look where it got us," I replied, going around wiping various surfaces. "What about that hooker? Had someone put out a contract on her?"

I don't remember, said the voice. *It just felt right.*

"And how did killing Dr. Brozgold feel?" I asked.

Good, said the voice after some consideration. *It felt good. I enjoyed it.*

"So did I," I admitted.

Then are we going back in business?

"No," I said. "If there's one thing I've learned as an

accountant, it's that everything has a pattern to it. Fall into the same old pattern and we'll wind up right back at the Institute."

Then what will we do? asked the voice.

"Oh, we'll go right on killing people," I assured it. "I must confess that it's addictive. But I make more than enough money to take care of my needs, and I don't suppose you have any use for money."

None, said the voice.

"So now we'll just kill whoever we want in any way that pleases us," I said. "They've made William Jordan a stickler for details, so I think we'll be a lot harder to catch than we were when I was you." I busied myself wiping the dresser as best I could.

"Of course," I added, crossing over to the desk and going to work on it, "I suppose we could start with Carlo Castinerra, just for old time's sake."

I'd like that, said the voice, trying to control its excitement.

"I thought you might," I said dryly. "And it will tidy up the last loose end from our previous life. I hate loose ends; I suppose it's my accountant's mind."

So that's where things stand now.

I've spent the last two days at the office, catching up on my work. At nights I've cased Castinerra's house. I know where all the doors and windows are, how to get to the sidewalk from the kitchen entrance, what time the servants leave, what time the lights go out.

So this Friday, at 5:00 PM on the dot, I'm going to leave the office and go out to dinner at a posh French restaurant that guarantees there are no soya products anywhere on the premises. After that I'll slide over to what's left of the theater district and catch the old *Sondheim* classic they've unearthed after all these years. Then it's off to an elegant nearby bar for a cocktail or two.

And then, with a little help from my shadow, I'll pay a long-overdue call on the estimable Mr. Castinerra.

Only this time, I'll do it right.

Erasures are, by and large, pretty lonely people. I can't tell you how nice it is to finally have a hobby that I can share with a friend.

— MIKE RESNICK

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CRYSTAL

By ALMA MARIA GARCIA

Illustrated by Rivera

Mary Ann Baldwin stood on the veranda of the ramshackle Offworld Health building. She savagely gripped the unfinished wooden rail, welcoming the sharp pain of the splinters in her palms. First Ritchie, then Michael, and now Todd, she thought.

"It's only his fifth birthday, Richard," she protested. "He can't keep up with you all."

"It'll do him good. You baby him too much."

"Don't run too fast."

"I'm a doctor, for God's sake, I know what my kids are capable of. I only want what's best for Todd."

Sure, she thought, just like you only wanted what was best for Ritchie when you wouldn't let him go to the zoo at the Santa Cruz colony.

Melody looked at her mother's set face. "Todd will be OK, Mom. I'll go wash the crystal for you and pack it away." She went inside. Mary Ann trailed after her, tears brimming.

The crystal was a wedding present from Mary Ann's grandmother. It had cost a small fortune to ship it to Boralia, a mining planet light years away from the regular space lanes. It was only brought out on special occasions. According to Dr. Baldwin, it represented gracious living, but from the beginning it had become a

symbol of Mary Ann's extravagance and selfishness.

"When are you going to stop ordering those useless magazines and gadgets from Earth?" Dr. Baldwin had asked, glaring at her.

"I thought we could afford them."

"You know damn well you used up all our spare credits importing the crystal."

"Richard!"

The time he threw out a smoking oil lamp, he said, "If you hadn't insisted on bringing the crystal, we could have had a generator."

"Richard, I—"

"If it weren't for the crystal, we might have afforded a newer house."

"It was your idea to bring the crystal, even though Offworld wouldn't pay for it. You said it would remind us of Earth — of our heritage."

"Oh, sure. Blame it all on me."

"Don't you remember, Richard, I said it wouldn't be appropriate in a place where there was no social life and nobody gave dinner parties?"

"We use it, don't we? You're always complaining and depressed because Boralia isn't what you expected."

Boralia is everything I expected. You are not.

After their fourth child, Todd, was born, it suddenly hadn't mattered what Dr. Baldwin said.

"Leave me alone, Richard. I need rest."

"Fine." He turned away.

"I want my own room."

He left the bedroom, slamming the door. He slept on

the couch that night. After that, he fixed up a cot in the dispensary.

Five years later, he was still sleeping there, his only companion a foul temper.

Mary Ann cried herself to sleep just about every night. In the mornings, her face was puffy and unattractive, which depressed her even more.

When the wife of the sole alien in their vicinity slithered in to request help for her husband's molt, only Mary Ann's sense of hospitality roused her from her dependency.

"Come in Scalnia." She offered the scaly apod a chair. "The Doctor has already left for the mining camp. I'll come instead and do my best, but I'm inexperienced and have no equipment. Can I get you some breakfast?"

"No, Mrs. Doctor, we cannot eat during the molting period; the food turns to poison in our bodies."

Mary Ann nodded. "It's an allergic reaction. I've heard the Doctor mention it. I didn't know it was your molting period, too."

"It should not be. I am not so far along as Borgli, but only one mate should be going through the molt, the other should already have gone through it."

"What happened? Did you miscalculate?"

The alien's head swung back and forth and she made a little wailing noise. "Not exactly, Mawan."

Scalnia had not mastered the pronunciation of Mary Ann's name, but Mary Ann rather liked the contraction and did not correct her.

The serpentine creature went on, "We knew this might happen, but we were very much drawn, attracted — in love? — and did not listen when our elders said we should wait with our families until at least one of us had gone through our final molt."

"How long will it last?"

"Ten darks and lights."

"And then —"

"And then we will be beautiful."

"You are beautiful now," said Mary Ann, stroking the shimmering blue and gold scales of the alien and looking into the slanted black eyes with their glowing ruby pupils. She could feel the powerful muscles rippling under the skin of the sinuous body. It made her shiver with delight.

Scalnia gave the alien equivalent of a laugh, which sounded like the rustling of the papery leaves on the waving stems of the alien bamboo.

"After our final molt, we will emerge with limbs, and I will bring gifts to repay you for your kindness, Mrs. Doctor. What would you like?"

Mary Ann gave a sardonic laugh. "What I want, no one can give me."

The alien wriggled, conveying concern. "I think I will be able to give you anything at all, Mrs. Doctor. Tell me what you want."

With a sigh, Mary Ann said, "I want freedom for my children."

Scalnia's serpent body heaved and reared. She

balanced on the tip of her tail, towering a full two feet over Mary Ann's head. "Your children are born with limbs. They are free already."

"They are not free in the way I mean."

The alien cocked her head on one side in an oddly human gesture, indicating she awaited further clarification.

Mary Ann explained. "I want them to be free to grow up as whole human beings, to realize they have seeds of great individuality within them, and they need not be doomed to follow in their parents' footsteps."

"I do not understand the concepts, but it is enough for me that you wish this thing. How can it be carried out?"

"It can't. The Doctor only recently let them attend the Earth School at Santa Cruz. He'd never let them go to Earth."

"You wish to send them away?"

Mary Ann nodded. "Yes, I don't want them to stay on Boralia because there's no work for them here, but our Offworld contract has no provision for sending anyone back to Earth, and the Doctor says we can't afford it."

Scalnia glided down to the floor and coiled around the chair, resting her head on the seat. "They could teach our young the Earth language, as you have taught me."

Mary Ann raised her hands and then let them fall again in futility. "It's not just that, Scally. They'll need mates and children of their own. There are few to choose from in Santa Cruz. It's possible they would return after they were married."

"And you, Mawan, and Mr. Doctor?"

"It's too late for me, and the Doctor sees no need for change."

Scalnia's graceful head circled and swooped. "I did not know Mr. Doctor was so — so difficult. I'll think about what you have told me, Mawan, but now can you come to help my Borgli?"

"Of course. I'll just leave a note for the children in case I'm not back when they come home from school."

Recent rain had brought down a quantity of sand and silt from the hills, which the seasonal dry wind blew in their faces, forcing them to cover their heads, slowing their progress. It took longer than either of them had expected to traverse the two or three kilometers to Scalnia and Borgli's cavelike home.

When they arrived, Borgli was struggling to split his lovely skin down the length of his writhing body.

Scalnia glided over to him and pulled with her tiny teeth on his thick, tight, scales. She turned to Mary Ann, who ran over and tugged at a portion of the skin around his neck. It wouldn't budge and was constricting his breathing.

Mary Ann tried to stay calm. What did Richard do when an alien was separated from its family during the final molt? Oh, God, she was sure Richard performed surgery on the gorgeous, tough hide.

"Scally, I need some kind of a cutting tool. Do you

have anything sharp?"

Scalnia rushed around, panic-stricken. They had no tools; without anything to grasp them with yet, she and Borgli couldn't use them.

The creature's delicate mouth worked pitifully. "No, Mawan, we have nothing."

"How does the family usually assist?"

"They cut a long slit down the belly before the hide gets too hard and pull on either side until it separates."

Since it wouldn't help matters, Mary Ann forbore to ask why they had moved away from the rest of the family when they knew this might happen.

What diseases did they suffer from? Would Borgli get an infection if she accidentally cut his new skin while helping him? She wished she'd asked Richard more questions. She'd just have to assume that certain principles of medicine were valid throughout the galaxy.

"I can do nothing for him unless we bring him back to the Doctor's house. We must hurry," she added, as his breathing became more and more distressed.

With the wind in their favor, Mary Ann dragged and Scalnia pushed the now unconscious Borgli down the dusty trail to the Baldwin compound.

Mary Ann began boiling kettles of water on the Earth-type, wood-burning stove the grateful miners had brought them soon after they'd arrived.

She looked in desperation at her kitchen knives. None were sharp enough. All the surgical equipment was kept in the land vehicle Richard used; he never left any of it lying around. What could she do?

Borgli's breaths rattled and wheezed in his throat. Mary Ann hunted around the small kitchen. The box containing the crystal caught her eye. She hauled it down from the shelf, opened it, grabbed a large jug by the handle, and smashed it against the stone sink. It shattered nicely with a sharp cutting edge attached to one side of the handle. She sterilized it in the boiling water.

She scrubbed the kitchen table.

"Help me get him up here," she said to Scalnia, who was swaying and mewing feebly, watching Mary Ann's preparations. Scalnia pushed underneath Borgli and raised him. Mary Ann maneuvered him into position. She washed the dust off his gleaming scales and poured an acrid, all-purpose microbicide over them. It made Mary Ann's eyes smart and her nose run, but it cleared her head.

With swift, sure strokes, Mary Ann applied the broken crystal to Borgli's hide. The tough scales gave way reluctantly along the scored line as she deepened it.

"Where are your families now?" Mary Ann asked, hoping to distract the agitated Scalnia, who was now gliding in and out of the furniture and coiling around the table legs.

"It was as though they left us in body and spirit when we did not listen to their advice. Oh, Mawan, we were so wanting to be together. . . ."

A faint echo sounded in Mary Ann's head, the voice of her father: "If you persist in going with Richard to

that lonely practice on Batvia —"

"Boralia."

"Whatever. You will be without your family, utterly at the mercy of the stars, not to mention Richard."

"Father, love is stronger than the stars. Richard needs me by his side."

"And what of your needs, Mary Ann?"

"I need to be with Richard."

The memory now seemed remote, as though it belonged to a previous life. It dissipated.

She concentrated on the deep groove in Borgli's hide. "I understand, Scally. I just hope you'll always want to be together."

The idea of not wanting made the alien gaze with her glowing red pupils at Mary Ann in silence.

At last, Borgli's neck was freed and his breathing eased. Mary Ann sighed with relief.

As the lower scaly section of his skin began to fall away, Borgli recovered consciousness and wriggled out, his new arms and legs pale and soft, but sturdy enough. He was not human; his head remained serpentine, but he definitely was masculine.

He knew no Earth words. As a way of thanking Mary Ann, he walked over and embraced her. For the first time in years, she felt an urge to respond sexually, just managing to curb the impulse at the last moment. This is crazy, she thought. His wife is right here.

Scalnia coiled around them both. "Thank you, Mawan. I will be forever grateful. Somehow I will repay you."

Sweating and embarrassed, Mary Ann freed herself. "I'm just happy I was able to help. Don't even think about repaying me."

"My molt will begin tomorrow or the next day. I will have my Borgli to help me. You have saved both our lives. You shall have both our skins. They are worth many credits on Boralia. Enough for trips to your Earth."

Mary Ann gasped, unable to comprehend what this might mean to her.

"H-how c-can I ever thank you?" she stammered.

The alien gently nudged Mary Ann with her serpent head. "I should be asking that question, Mawan."

Mary Ann shoofed them out the door. "Go celebrate, or something," she told them.

Once alone, a new and strange resolve began building inside her. She removed the rest of the crystal from the box, set it out on the table, and sat down to wait for Richard's return. I might just have enough time to do it before the children get back, she thought.

When Dr. Baldwin came home, a crystal cup flew through the air by his head and smashed on the door post, falling with a tinkling crash to the floor.

He stood, stock-still, staring at the shattered crystal on the ground beside him. Before he could say anything, a plate and a serving dish followed. CRASH! SMASH!

Methodically, Mary Ann picked up piece after piece and aimed at the door. She had never used profanity in her life, but now she came close. "You stupid — mmm

— ooh! I never wanted it in the first place — it was YOUR dumb idea!"

When the last piece of crystal lay in ruins in the doorway, Mary Ann smiled, picked up Borgli's hide and stroked it.

Richard crunched through the glass towards her and touched her arm. "I — I had no idea you disliked the crystal, Mary Ann. I thought you wanted it. That's why I had it shipped out with us."

She didn't even care he acknowledged it was his idea. Nor did she bother explaining there was nothing really wrong with the crystal; just with his complaints about it.

"I hated it."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Would you have sent it back?" She laughed at the idea.

"Dearest, we must talk. Things haven't been right between us for way too long. It's been my fault as well as yours. Can we put it all behind us and start afresh?"

Her eyes widened. Were a few broken glass dishes all it took to bring him to his senses? All these years of kowtowing to this man for fear of his violence, and here he was, behaving like a lamb.

"Mary Ann, I miss you terribly and I want to move back in the bedroom."

It was too much of an about-face for her to take him seriously. He was probably in shock, she thought, and didn't know what he was saying.

"I don't know, Richard, I'll have to think it over. Let's wait a while and see how it goes."

"I'll help you clean up the mess," he said.

In a daze, Mary Ann scooped up dustpan after dustpan of broken glass and tried to come to terms with what Richard was saying.

"I love you, Mary Ann. You've given me wonderful children and you're a very good mother. Let's stop acting like two idiots and live normally."

Almost against her will, Mary Ann was softening. Deep down, hadn't she known she was partially to blame for Richard's moods? And the memory of Borgli's embrace still burned.

"We-ell—"

Before she could finish, Dr. Baldwin took her in his arms, kissed her long and hard and guided her into the bedroom.

"The children—" she began, but a quick glance at the Earth-clock, revealed the Santa Cruz school land vehicle would not arrive for another twenty-five minutes.

Their lovemaking was hungry, yet tender. Afterwards, Mary Ann sat on the bed and caressed Borgli's hide.

Dr. Baldwin had an early morning appointment with the medical director of the hospital in Santa Cruz. He whistled as he shaved with the old-style razor; somehow he'd never gotten used to the hair-growth inhibitors.

Mary Ann watched him lazily from the bed. She had

almost forgotten how sensual he was. Standing there in his bikini shorts, muscles rippling as he guided the razor over the stubble on his chin, he reminded her of Borgli.

She wanted to tell him to wait, to be late, to send an excuse to the medical director, but five years of depression, sleeping alone, and feeling powerless had choked her spontaneity.

She watched through the bedroom window as Richard strode towards the path where their LV was parked. He was about to climb in, when a glittering gold and blue figure appeared from behind it.

Mary Ann's first thought was that Scalnia was again seeking assistance. She screamed as she realized her mistake. The alien had swiftly coiled around the doctor and snapped his head back.

Scalnia gently laid Dr. Baldwin's body on the scrubby grass of the compound, and slithered towards the door. "I have repaid the debt, Mawan," she called out in her sing-song voice. "Now your children are free."

—ALMA MARIA GARCIA



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KNOCKOUT

By ROBERT E. ROGOFF

Illustrated by Heywood

The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door...

The man instantly went cold as a moon of Neptune. Someone else had survived. His first impulse was to grab one of the shotguns he had collected in the early days, back when he feared roving bands of pillaging survivalists might suddenly break down his door to wrest his provisions away. But the knock had been tentative, almost timid. He muted the videotape of *On the Beach* into silence and put the TV remote control down beside him on the end table.

No dangerous marauder would claim authorship of such a delicate knock. It was as if a child were knocking. The seated man sprang from his lounge chair with growing joy — if a child had survived, perhaps the human race was not extinct after all.

He bounded to the door, delirious with the giddy nervous excitement of a teenager on a first date, or an australopithecine discovering fire, or Albert Einstein scrawling " $E=mc^2$ " for the first time. His hand slipped

with cold perspiration as he unbolted the deadlock and turned the door handle.

His heart pounded, forge-like, as he realized that before him stood another human being. And she was a young, beautiful woman. "You don't know how glad I am to see you!" the man cried.

"Actually, like, I do," said the woman, tightening her leather jacket around her as the wind played long tresses of beautiful hair around her face. Her features were sharp and provocative, yielding the suggestion of a fox. She gazed down, knowingly, and the man realized he was naked.

In his growing modesty, the man pulled a robe around himself, knowing she had seen his manhood start to rise like a serpent at the very sight of her. He reached out and touched her hand, urging her into his home. Feeling another human's flesh again made him dizzy. "I'm sorry. I must sit down. Would you care for some canned tuna? A frozen dinner? Beer?"

"No thank you," said the feminine figure, stepping in and perching on the armrest of the man's chair. "This is a whole new world," she said.

"But it's ours!" he said. He reached up to caress her forearm and found it surprisingly hard and sinewy. He thought to himself, how fortunate to stumble upon a

woman who was in such good condition. She would probably be extremely fertile, not to mention good in the feathers. "It's up to us to be fruitful and multiply, if you get my drift."

"I get your drift all right, but I don't think that's going to happen."

"Is something wrong — are you . . . barren?"

She got up and turned away, pulling an apple out of her jacket pocket. She took a few steps toward the flickering images on the TV, then spun around brightly, with the coordination and purpose of a dancer. She took a chomp out of the apple.

Hearing the crisp wetness of her teeth biting into the ripe fruit, the man felt his mouth watering and he could barely contain himself. But he suddenly realized, she had probably been lost and wandering a long time. He could not just suddenly take her. At the very least, introductions were in order. He stood formally. "My name is Adam," he said.

"What a coincidence," said the other in the room,

who then reached up. Hands grabbed the long tresses of beautiful hair and yanked, pulling off a wig exposing a masculine receding hairline beneath. "My name is Adam, too."

—ROBERT E. ROGOFF

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DESSERT

By ROBERT E. ROGOFF

Illustrated by L. Larsen

The waitress hovered around their table like a moth near a light. Finally, the hideously obese man waved her away.

"We're not ready to order yet," he said. "Come back in a few minutes."

After the waitress departed, the weasel-like man with the scar across his face addressed his dining companion seated across the table from him. "I can assure you as we sit here tonight that Miller is quite dead or will be within minutes."

The obese man chortled. "That is good news." He turned his massive body and snapped his fingers. The chair groaned in protest.

The waitress sluggishly made her way to the table. "What'll it be, honey?"

"I'm celebrating tonight," said the obese man. "Let me have a super duper hot fudge sundae with the works." He almost drooled as he said this.

"And you, dearie?" the waitress asked scarf.

"Just coffee for me, dearie." He grinned, showing a crooked row of teeth.

The fat man looked as serious as his Buddha-like visage allowed. "You'll receive the other ten thousand as per our agreement."

Scarf grinned again and rubbed his hands together. "Mr. Wilson," he said, "In my line of business it pays to know what makes people tick. If you don't think it too presumptuous of me, I'd like to inquire—" He stopped abruptly as the waitress approached to fill his coffee cup. After she slowly melted away to the recesses of the dingy restaurant, he continued. "I was wondering . . . just exactly *why* did you have me make this hit?"

Wilson picked up his fork and rubbed a finger across

its tines. "I suppose I can tell you. I don't care whether you believe me or not."

"Why wouldn't I believe you?"

"Mr. Sloane, the sundae I ordered was the first food in years not on my very strenuous 400-calorie-a-day diet."

Sloane suppressed a smile. Tell me another story, he thought.

Wilson continued. "Despite eating almost nothing since 1985, my weight has ballooned to over four hundred pounds. Last month I determined — never mind how — that Miller was eating for me. He ate the food and I gained the weight."

Sloane laughed but covered it by faking a coughing fit. This blimp was loon city. But a job was a job. He would take anyone's money, even a loony tune-blimp like Wilson's.

The waitress appeared and placed the sundae before Wilson. Wilson grabbed his spoon and eagerly attacked the monstrous ice cream creation. He lifted the first spoonful. "Here's to the demise of Miller," he said, slurping the ice cream down.

Suddenly he dropped the spoon. It clattered to the formica table top. A clump of fudge-covered ice cream splattered nearby.

"Are you okay?" asked Sloane.

"I don't feel too well," moaned Wilson. A glazed look came into his eyes. "Oh, no. Don't tell me..."

"What?"

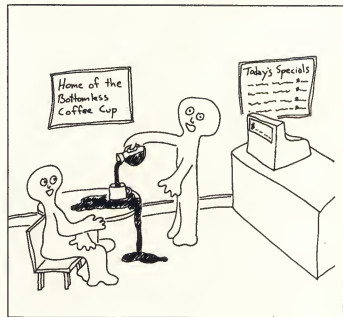
"How did you do it?" he demanded. He was beginning to feel dizzy. And afraid.

"Do it?" asked Sloane, fingering his scar.

"How did you kill Miller?"

Sloane smiled crookedly. "Nothin' to it, Mr. Wilson. I poisoned his dinner."

—ROBERT E. ROGOFF





I'M DYING OUT HERE

By ROBERT E. ROGOFF

Illustrated by Tom X

Flop sweat was coming off him like William S. Burroughs coming off junk in a fictitious autobiography. Why did the microphone have to remind him of a penis *now*? — just as he was coming to the part in the bit about the gay bar? Shit, he thought, *I'm dying out here*. The material didn't matter any more. What mattered? Life, the Universe, and Everything? Get a grip, he thought (not necessarily on the microphone). "Speaking of AIDS," he continued by rote as his inner mind anchored him in reality. My name is Bart Berger, I'm doing stand-up at a comedy club — where, Albuquerque? No big deal, he couldn't geographically place himself — since he had started being well-known enough to do the circuit he often didn't know what city he was in. Today's date — what was today's date? As he spewed his "comedy routine" in a manner not inconsistent with executing a will, Berger realized he was not really seriously out of touch with reality after all. "I know an intravenous drug user who is so self destructive, when he shoots up, he uses a real gun." Howls of demented New Mexico laughter peeled the air raw like a bad case of sunburn on a cowboy's neck.

A partially full can of Coors' sailed by Berger's right ear, spewing liquid behind it as if rocket-propelled. He instinctively flinched like a dog avoiding a nose swat with a rolled-up newspaper. "Sonofabitch New York Jew," came a voice smeared like poorly-applied sunscreen, from the same vicinity as had come the beer can.

They always thought he was a Jew in these hick towns. They didn't realize he was a strayed Catholic, primarily of German ancestry. But his grandparents had hidden a family of Jews in their Berlin basement. Save a Jew for Christ. There was a joke in there somewhere, it just had to be teased out properly. He was losing it tonight. He thought about what his psychiatrist Dr. Sam had told him about the studies linking manic-depressive mental illness with a gift for creative thought. But was ripping off material like a sweatshop sewing-machine operator the same thing as creativity?

Maybe he was not "oriented times three" — the medical jargon for the first criteria of not being psychotic — maybe he didn't even exist. College was a long time ago, why was he asking "What is reality?" to himself as he uttered the punchline to a joke only Russian Jews usually got: "So the rabbi says, do you know how to daven yet? Yes or no?" Why had he done *that* joke? An intellectual defense mechanism — or just a death wish? For all he knew the whole audience was conspiring to take him on a train ride to a shower stall where poison gas came out of the shower head.

A single laugh slashed the brutal silence. Berger thought it came from a corner of the room —but being in

the spotlight he couldn't see a thing beyond the stage. He momentarily lost his timing, then on a tangent started involuntarily thinking about his college days. On automatic pilot jokes came spilling from his mouth he had never written, stolen, or even thought about before.

"My junior year I went out with this girl a couple of times but I stopped seeing her because she was an alcoholic. I just found out she's married and pregnant. She went to her doctor and said: 'I'm all distraught and frightened. I've been drinking all this time carrying this unborn fetus. I'm afraid it will be born with fetal alcohol syndrome.'" SHIT! he thought, this punchline is roaring at me like the locomotive in that Buster Keaton movie, AND IT'S NOT FUNNY! "The doctor told her: 'It's nothing. Go home, relax, and have a drink.'"

The crowd roared with laughter. Assholes, he thought, his younger sister had been born with Down Syndrome and died at the age of twenty. BIRTH DEFECTS AREN'T FUNNY! The crowd laughed again. I didn't say anything else, he thought. More laughter.

"My senior year I dated this really gorgeous girl —" the laughter drowned him out, so he yelled: "but I stopped going out with her because she *wasn't* an alcoholic!"

Silence. They were laughing in the wrong places. But where were these jokes coming from?

Laughter again.

A heckler shouted: "I don't know where *you're* coming from!"

Images of Nazis parading in front of Hitler stormtrooped through Berger's semi-conscious mind. The bully who took his lunch money in third grade. The time he ran out of gas in the desert. The dream date with the woman, a hot looking fast-rising comic, who told him she'd never seen a smaller penis on a full-grown man, then laughed as if she was having a comedy orgasm. His grandfather having a fatal stroke as Berger read the newspaper article about the resurgence of neo-Nazism in America to the man. Breaking his tooth on a stone in his burrito.

Earth to Berger! Earth to Berger! I have the ability to think clearly under extreme stress, he told himself.

"Well, then, you must not be under extreme stress now!" chorused the audience in unison.

He sat down on the stage, feeling the hardness of its nicked wooden floorboards through his dress pants, and, out of the spotlight, surveyed the audience. The audience stopped congealing into a faceless mass and began individuating, like cells of a blastocyst turning into an embryo. In the front row sat a girl with the characteristic features of Down Syndrome. God, it was creepy how all those kids looked alike. This girl could be his sister Jeanne.

"I am," said Jeanne from the first row.

"You hear that, Billy?" asked the gray-haired man next to Jeanne — Berger's dead grandfather. "I told you she was talkative."

This can't be happening, thought Berger.

"Maybe it isn't," chorused six million Jews in unison.

"I knew this was coming the day they started you on Lithium," said William S. Burroughs.

Berger said, "Let me guess — you're ALL DEAD?"

"Yes," said Jack Benny from a seat off to Berger's right. "You're familiar with the term 'you killed them'?" Benny asked pausing exactly long enough and then saying, "Well, you *killed them*."

The audience howled with ecstasy.

He recognized John Lennon. He recognized Nikolai Lenin. He recognized Richard M. Nixon.

"Do me," said Nixon. "Come on, Bart, you remember — it was right after Watergate."

Berger remembered. The flop sweat was forgotten. He didn't feel anything at all anymore. His voice faltered but he choked out: "Nixon before Watergate." He held his Nixonian gesture that, under other circumstances, was also the symbol for peace, or a communication used by a commodities arbitrageur. "I am the President." He dropped his arms with his hands in the V-for victory configuration, or thought he did — he couldn't tell if they were even attached to his shoulders anymore. "Nixon after Watergate: 'I'm *not* the President.'"

JFK stood. "Do me."

"I never did you, I was too young."

"You'll do me now."

Berger assumed a Massachusetts accent and said: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask who the phenord shot me?"

"Am I dead, too?" Berger asked.

Silence.

"I DON'T THINK YOU HEARD ME —"

"What, do you have a goyishe kup?" demanded Lenny Bruce as he was hauled out of the audience by three vice cops dressed circa the 1950s.

Wait a minute, thought Berger. If this is a hallucination, maybe it's not consistent, or can be manipulated be sheer thought alone.

A frightened gasp issued from the audience.

If I can kill them, I can have them —

They were rolling in the aisles.

I can have them —

They were puking up on themselves.

Jesus Christ! thought Berger, slightly feeling the eyes of a man who was maybe more than just a man gently wander over him. What if I want them to turn to the left, turn to the right, stand up, sit down —

"Fight! Fight! Fight!" the crowd cheered.

He had all the women strip.

He had all the women masturbate.

He had all the women come.

When he was done messing with all of the audience's bodies, he began on their minds. "In the *Wizard of Oz*, the horse of another color was colored with jello because certain types of coloring would have killed it. The model who was spray-painted gold in *Goldfinger* actually did pass away, poisoned from the

pigment. The Caucasian man who took melanin pills in *Black Like Me* also kicked the bucket. They all dyed.

"This is an interactive joke: My two favorite TV shows are *L.A. Law* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* because. . .

"Ending one: they are both set in California.

"Ending two: they are both set in outer space."

He thought love at them. He thought hate at them. He thought a pile of shit the size of the Rocky Mountains at them.

If life is a joke, and death is the punchline, who is the audience?

We are, they thought back. But look again.

He didn't so much look as reach out somehow.

In return, he was touched by every thought ever thought since thoughts had been thought. Every emotion ever felt out since emotions had been felt. Every experience ever had by any human being past, present, and future. Every life form on Earth. Every life form in the Universe. Every object in the Universe, every last subatomic particle.

There is no conservation of matter, he quipped somehow in the hyperaware connectedness he was a part of now, only conversation of matters.

A warm nourishment, not unlike laughter distilled to its epitome, washed through the Unity he was now part of.

The Unity accepted Berger.

Berger accepted the Unity.

Berger ceased to end where Unity began.

The Hispanic maid chewing nicotine gum unlocked and entered the door of the motel room in Flagstaff,

Arizona. The TV was tuned to *The Nashville Network*, but the sound was off. Slumped on the bed was Billy Berger's body, his chin stubbled with beard, his clothes wrinkled with decadence. On the night stand was his empty medication bottle. The maid had seen this before. She lifted the telephone receiver.

The Unity dissolved like the suds of a bubblebath that had lasted too long, like a bachelor party gone wicked.

Berger saw the vital signs monitor twice and heard it a million times as it beeped.

"I think he's coming out of it," said an impression of a petite woman with a gold tooth and hair the color of burnt pudding.

A man with a wild shock of salt-and-pepper hair wearing a white jacket was bent over Berger, holding a stethoscope to Berger's chest like a quack portrayed by Sid Caesar in the 1950s. "You almost got away from us that time," he said in a poor imitation-Viennese accent. "Don't do it again, okay, kiddo?"

"Doctor," whispered Berger weakly, "will I ever play the violin again?"

"Why not?"

"I never could before. . . ."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" asked the doctor, scowling.

"It's *supposed* to be," said Berger.

"Well, you're supposed to be dead, too, how do you explain that?"

"Maybe I *am* dead. maybe all three of us are dead."

The audience cheered, giving Berger the standing ovation he really could have lived without.

—ROBERT E. ROGOFF

Jiffy Thoroughthink's 5-Star Book Review

SEX AND THE MULTIPLE ALIEN

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This is one of those books you just can't put down. You can send away for a release mechanism when you've completely scanned the entire file to end-of-line, already opened the book and the Tangleweed has hold of you and your face is purple with cyanotic surprise.

To put the book down, you simply release the gas canister toward the more bloodshot of its seventy-some-odd eyes and press the Tangleweed's bellybutton.

If the creature refuses categorically to release its grip, simply contact the Magellan System Autocratic Government Department of Mercantile Complaints. By the time they've responded, either you or the Tangle will have resolved the conflict. Power to the victor!

I liked the development of the material; putting it in chapter form was a novel concept, and if it doesn't catch on, I'm no five-star reviewer!

Avoid counterfeits; the Tangleweeds on the clone varieties are the Evilgame Mutations; they have no navels.

THE EARTH MY DESTINATION

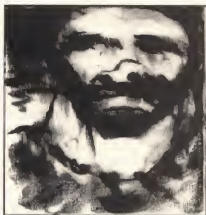
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A rather far-out contemplative piece from Alfrei Sterbe, conceiving of some rather fanciful long-dead civilizations on some other dimension.

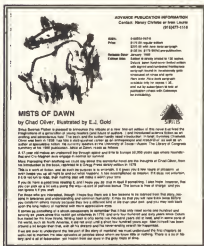
"Earth" has a dominant species of biped hominid which has developed speech, some rudimentary thought, and a crude form of energy-handling which involves engines of mechanical mass.

Not your hard science, eh, what? On top of that, author (sic) Sterbe postulates an intelligent species employing atomic power for warfare. Show me one intact planet where that happened and I'll endorse this one. Otherwise, my suspension of disbelief doesn't relax deeply enough for me to get into it, eh?



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by Chad Oliver



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DANCES WITH ELVES

By CYNTHIA WARD

Illustrated by Boyd

"**E**lves!" called Roosoo the Anvil. "O Fair Folk, hear my plea! I have given up my family and my trade! I have given up the human world! I want to join you!"

The Fair Folk were the greatest, purest, wisest people in the world. They lived in peace with one another, in accord with the spirits, and in harmony with nature. Where they lived, the forest bloomed all year with sweet-scented blossoms and sweet-tasting fruit. When they hunted, the animals came willingly to them. Sometimes, Roosoo knew, they stole human babies. He did not understand why this caused the parents such sorrow; the Elves had given the children a gift beyond compare.

Roosoo the Anvil waited, but no answer to his call came from the surrounding forest. Finally he crouched, slowly, as though pressed down by the weight of the darkness around his small fire. Three nights and three days had he waited, alone in the wilderness, surviving on nuts and berries. He had brought no food into the forest and, though he was a blacksmith, he had brought no iron.

"Why couldn't I have been raised by the Fair Folk?"

Roosoo asked the night. He bowed his head. "O Gods," he prayed, "grant me my wish, to join the first and greatest of Your creations."

When he raised his head, he found his campfire ringed about by seven motionless Elves. He had been accounted "fair as an Elf" by the women of his town, but in the presence of the Elves he suddenly felt as ugly and gnarled as a hunchback.

The tallest of the tall Elves spoke, in the Old Tongue, in a voice as clear and flowing as a stream. "We have heard your cries, these last three nights. Why do you disturb us?"

"I called you because I wish to join you." Roosoo heard his voice creak like an old chair, but made himself continue. "I have left the world behind, in pursuit of my desire. You are so wise and fair, I would give anything to be one of you."

The Elves smiled at one another, a brief flash of teeth whiter than a human smile could ever be.

The tallest Elf turned back to Roosoo. "If you are willing, human, you may become one with the Elves."

"You *know* I am willing."

"I am known as Eagle Striking," said the tallest Elf. "Put out your fire, human, and follow us."

Roosoo emptied his waterskin, extinguishing the small fire. He blinked in the blackness of night.

At dawn, the Elves led the human out of the forest, into a clearing overgrown with wild roses, strawberries, poppies, daisies, and a score of flowers Roosoo did not recognize. In the middle of this field stood a grove of fruit and oak trees. The apple, pear, and cherry trees were bowed under the weight of fruit. The Elves dwelt high in the branches of the oaks, in shelters woven of branches and grass. Among the several score Elves who greeted him, Roosoo saw a few children, all as quiet, dignified, and beautiful as the adults. He saw no human children — if there were changelings here, they had changed completely.

The Fair Folk prepared a feast of welcome. Some piled wood high in the center of the grove, while others filled baskets with fruit and berries. Eagle Striking led Roosoo out of the grove and deeper into the ancient forest. He bade Roosoo stand quiet in the shadow of a shaggy pine. Then he drew his knife. Roosoo's heart slammed against his chest. Eagle Striking turned away.

The Elf took up a position several yards from Roosoo. He stood motionless, his white skin and butter-colored buckskin tunic shading into the browns and yellows of tree boles and fallen leaves.

Within moments a red deer appeared, a great stag crowned with tined antlers. Head upraised, legs steady, the stag approached the Elf and stretched out its slender neck. Eagle Striking laid the stone knife across the jugular and sawed at the tough hide. When blood spurted like water from a fountain, Roosoo felt faint, though he had poached the king's deer many times. He reminded himself that the animal had come to Eagle Striking in

accord with the harmony of nature.

At the feast, Roosoo the Anvil ate better than he ever had in his life. The venison was savory, not gamy, and tender as veal. As the feast progressed, a group of Elves chanted wild strange songs Roosoo couldn't understand over the bone-shaking throb of log drums. When other Elves rose up and made a ring around the fire, Roosoo realized he was about to witness the legendary dance of the Elves. He could not believe his good fortune. He never expected to be invited to join them.

He shook his head at their beckoning gestures until Eagle Striking left the dance and grabbed his wrist and dragged him to the fire. "Human, do you see the pattern?"

Roosoo shook his head. The pattern was far too complex and the drumming too fast. But the beat slowed, and the dancers shouted encouragement, and moved slowly so that he could learn. Eagle Striking pulled him into motion, and the drums beat fast again, and Roosoo found himself dancing the ancient Elvish dance.

In the morning, Roosoo ate as well as he had last night, breakfasting on fruit, wild-pig ham, and wheat bread dipped in honey. He lay against a tree, his hands on his overfull stomach, somnolent, insensible of the passing hours.

Eagle Striking came up to him and pressed a scrap of dried fruit into his hand.

"I am not hungry," Roosoo said apologetically.

"Eat this toadstool if you would see as we see," Eagle Striking said. "Eat, and know the harmony of the world."

Roosoo examined the toadstool, a long, dirty-looking white stem topped with a small, tight-fitting brown cap. How could this shriveled scrap give him the wisdom of Elves?

He felt his stomach tremble. He quickly thrust the mushroom into his mouth and bit down. The stem snapped like an old stick. As he chewed, his saliva softened the mushroom, but the foul taste blotted up the moisture in his mouth. He swallowed with difficulty. He could not imagine how he could gain knowledge in this manner, and the attempt to imagine it made his stomach queasy. He calmed his mind and lay still.

After a while he realized the trees of the grove made a pattern. The pattern included all the trees he could see, and all the trees he could not see. He understood the pattern of the forest: the harmony of the trees with the animals, with the birds that flew above, with the worms that burrowed below. He understood the necessity of the deer eating the leaves and the wolf eating the deer. He turned to look at the huge oak he leaned against, and traced the furrows in the bark, following the pattern. *Everything* was part of the pattern. Roosoo the Anvil laid his cheek against the rough bark, spread his arms as wide as they could stretch, and embraced the tree.

When evening thickened in the grove, the Elves built their bonfire. The human stared into the fire, watching

the flames leap and twist in a dance as beautiful and meaningful as the dance of the Elves, or the pattern of the world.

Roosoo realized Eagle Striking stood beside him, and the other Elves stood close around him. Eagle Striking laid his hand gently on Roosoo's shoulder. "Human, do you see the pattern?"

Roosoo spoke slowly. "Yes."

Eagle Striking asked, "Are you ready to be one with the Elves?"

Roosoo smiled dreamily. "I am," he replied.

And so the Elves cooked and ate him.

—CYNTHIA WARD

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BAD MOON RISING

By JAMES L. WRIGHT, JR.

Illustrated by Needham

The Clemens Elementary School auditorium was filled to capacity with proud parents who chatted amiably to draw their attention away from the uncomfortably small student seats before the concert began. Behind the curtains, Mrs. Strader's sixth-grade choir warmed up slowly, singing "do-re-me" while trying not to fidget in their heavily-starched outfits. Mrs. Strader smiled warmly at the students, giving her warmest glances to those who looked particularly uncomfortable or nervous.

The warmups ceased, the audience quieted, and the curtains rose. After the Pledge of Allegiance, the concert began with a rousing — and surprisingly recognizable — rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner." At the conclusion of the national anthem, the audience applauded wildly. The next two numbers, "Amazing Grace" and the Carpenters' "Top of the World," were also well performed and well received.

As the applause subsided, two boys stepped to the front of the choir to sing solos in the next number, "One Tin Soldier." The two stood straight and tall — the dark-haired boy at stage right, more than a head taller than the other. He had the awkward, jumbled look of early puberty, but he still sported a beautiful soprano voice.

The tall boy sang the first verse flawlessly; he saw the pride in his mother's face and smiled as his father

took photo after photo with the family Instamatic. The shorter boy sang the second verse with a slight but intentional vibrato that sent chills through the crowd. The tall boy began the third verse as perfectly as the first, but soon disaster struck — his voice warbled and dropped an octave, jumped back up, then settled on an A Flat somewhere in between; he tried to recover, but his hormones and growing embarrassment betrayed him, and the notes escaping his lips soon sounded completely random as his blue eyes welled with tears.

At first, the audience was silent, too stunned to react. But the poor boy sounded so pathetic, so ridiculous, that eventually it got the better of everyone, including Mrs. Strader; they began to laugh nervously — then uncontrollably — as the tall boy tried desperately to finish, his wavering voice deteriorating even further through his mounting sobs of shame and humiliation.

The boy on stage began to grow even taller, still singing and sobbing, as the roar of the audience increased. Soon he was a man, drenched in his own sweat and tears, overwhelmed by the deafening laughter of the crowd. He noticed his father put the camera away, his own eyes glistening.

I awoke from the nightmare fully clothed, drenched to the bone, and sobbing my eyes out. It took a moment to realize that more than mere sweat and tears had me dripping; I had been sleeping outside, and overlapping arcs of sprinkler water passed over me every few seconds. Where was I? I rubbed the moisture from my face and looked around.

As I scanned my surroundings between splashes of water, I realized I had spent the night in a park. It was

light enough to see in the smoggy, purple and grey pre-dawn haze so common to southern California. I wasn't the only park sleeper, but I was the only one who didn't look like I belonged there. I saw some joggers and a few cars, most with their lights on, on the road a few dozen yards away. I still wasn't sure, though, which park I was in. Long Beach had so many . . . if I was in Long Beach. I noticed my jacket a few feet away from me, dark with moisture . . . and overflowing with money.

I started to get up, but my muscles protested; they were stiff and sore, like I'd been hiking all night. I stretched and rubbed my arms, neck, and legs for a few moments before moving again. I collected the money on my jacket, the nightmare and my strange surroundings temporarily forgotten.

I began counting the money. Forty . . . forty-five . . . fifty — I heard someone say, "Hey, great job last night." Sixty . . . sixty-five — huh? I looked around, but whoever had spoken was gone now. I shrugged and resumed counting.

I had awakened to two-hundred eighty-three dollars in bills and enough nickels, dimes and quarters to sink the Titanic. I pocketed the bills and gave the change to my sleeping parkmates, then walked toward the street. Wherever I was, at least I could afford the trip home.

"You'll be fine, Michael. Some bruises and scratches, but nothing serious. The next time you decide to sleep outside, however, I suggest you remember your sleeping bag. And sleep away from the sprinklers; you could catch pneumonia." Dr. Simons frowned sternly, but his eyes twinkled.

I usually hated being called Michael, but Dr. Simons had been our family physician since I was a kid, and it felt okay coming from him. It didn't matter that I was in my mid-twenties, looked older, and was called "Mister" by most people I met; to him I'd always be six years old. In his office I usually felt that old, too, and I didn't mind.

"I promise, Doctor. Honest, though, I hadn't planned on it. That's why I came in; I can't remember what happened last night." I never considered calling him Doc; "Doctor" was a years-old habit, and any other name seemed disrespectful. "The last thing I remember was walking home from school last night."

"Have you had a memory loss before?"

I shook my head. "If so, I always made it home. This is the first time I've slept somewhere strange." The park was in an unfamiliar neighborhood, about two miles away from my apartment and a short walk from the lower campus of Cal State Long Beach, where I was working on a Master's degree in Computer Science.

"It's probably nothing, but if it happens again, come in immediately." Dr. Simons took a deep breath, as he usually did when he searched for answers to difficult questions; over the years, this had proven surprisingly effective. "But as long as you're here," he said, "let me take another look at your shoulder."

I had almost forgotten about my shoulder wound. I

removed my shirt again. The month-old bite marks were barely visible now, but Dr. Simons had said bites from people had more danger of disease and infection than most animal bites. "It looks fine, but why don't we run some more tests?" he said with soothing reassurance. I nodded my assent.

I thought about my shoulder as his assistant took the blood samples. I'd seen Dr. Simons a month before, the day after I got mugged on the way home from a beach party in Santa Monica. At the time I felt lucky I hadn't been killed; the guy had caught me from behind and knocked me on my back, and glared at me with fierce bloodshot eyes and a gaping smile that looked more animal than human. He tore the pocket off my shirt and my wallet went flying; when I reached for it, he yanked me upright and bit my right shoulder. I screamed; on instinct I pushed myself away from him, drew back and kicked hard, connecting solidly with his crotch and sending him reeling. My friends came running when they heard the screams, but by the time they reached me the attacker and my wallet had vanished into a dark alley. My roommate, Matt, had seen well enough to give a good description to the police; I had remembered little more than his eyes and hideous grin. They found my wallet in the alley the next day, with nothing missing and no fingerprints. The attacker had never been found.

"You have a pretty voice," the medical assistant, Denise, said, and I snapped back to reality.

"Excuse me?"

"You were humming just now, and it sounded very nice. I don't know the song, though." She started humming; it took a few moments for me to recognize the tune as "One Tin Soldier." My stomach tightened. I had hated the song since sixth grade, and until last night's nightmare I hadn't heard or thought about it in years.

"Thanks," I whispered, hoping it sounded sincere, and almost certain it didn't.

I went straight from the doctor's office to school. I had a few hours to study before my three o'clock Data Structures class; Professor Lewis usually gave a quiz on Thursdays. At least it wouldn't be an oral quiz.

I woke up yelling. At least I was in my room this time, and the wetness of my clothing came only from sweat. Another nightmare, completely different from my childhood nightmare the previous week, but shot through with the same disturbing emotions.

In my dream I was on a stage in front of a large group of people. I was doing — something — and the people in the crowd were laughing and clapping. The room was dark; a bright light was shining on me. I watched myself on the stage; I looked confident, like I belonged there, wanted to be there. *Needed* to be there.

I felt an overwhelming sense of dread. I could see no danger; the crowd looked harmless, too happy responding to whatever I was doing to pose any threat. Even so, I screamed at myself to escape from the stage; I was certain that every second I remained in front of the

crowd was terribly, unspeakably wrong. I tried desperately to be heard, but I had no voice, and the me on stage remained, oblivious to my cries.

I didn't know how long I had been screaming before I awoke. The green LED of my alarm clock read 4:12.

I don't know why I still feared crowds. Not being *in* one, mind you; just being the focus of one. I had dropped choir, given up singing, and even skipped my high school graduation to avoid standing in front of a group of people. Being the center of attention was worse than being boiled alive, I thought, even fifteen years after my puberty-induced solo-from-hell. It wasn't that I'd screwed up — hell, how can you control hormones? I just couldn't stand the thought of being laughed at ever again. That's why I guess I'd gotten into computers in the first place — a machine will never laugh at you.

My roommate knocked on my door. "You okay, Mikey?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm fine, Matt," I answered hoarsely. "It was just a nightmare."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure. Go back to sleep."

I emptied the pitcher of ice water I kept on my nightstand in one gulp and slowly, warily, closed my eyes.

When I awoke on the steps of the Cal State Long Beach math/science building with money falling off my chest, I screamed like I'd awakened next to a severed head. Two girls walking by dropped their books and also screamed, and a nearby campus security guard withdrew his baton and ran toward me. It took several minutes of talking and some of the money that had fallen onto the steps to convince them to leave me alone. I was fine, I insisted.

It *could* only convince myself.

It had been several weeks since I'd awakened in the park. I hadn't dreamed that night, which in itself was a small relief — I'd had many nightmares in the past month. I had stayed at school late the day before, finishing a project for Compiler Design. But after that . . . I could remember nothing. I gathered the money around me — only eighty bucks this time, I discovered with some disappointment — and went to the phone in the snack area to call Dr. Simons.

"You want me to *what*?" Matt was looking at me like I had asked him to take me to the Prom — no anger, but some apprehension. He'd been suffering too; my nightmares were becoming more frequent, and my screams were getting to him. I finally pitched in to buy him some ear plugs.

"I'm scared, okay? I want someone with me if it happens again."

"If *what* happens again, Mikey?"

"I wish I knew, Matt. I want a witness. Or a designated driver." Matt laughed loudly; we both knew I didn't drink. "It may be the only way to figure out

what's happening to me."

Dr. Simons had been unable to find anything wrong. Technically, nothing was wrong, aside from the nightmares and waking up in strange places with more money than memory. I was determined that if it happened again, I would have a witness to whatever I couldn't remember on my own.

"But why now? It's been almost a month."

"It seems to happen every month or so. If it happens again, it'll be soon."

"You're overreacting. It's probably nothing." His voice gave away the lie. He wanted my nightmares to end too, if only to give him a decent night's sleep.

"*Nothing* is what I know," I said, my voice rising. "Look, I'll pay for everything. Besides, we haven't done much together lately. If you want, we can call Stacey and Lisa, and we'll double."

Matt thought about it for a second, then smiled. "Well, as long as you're buying . . ." he laughed, and I joined in.

"Just don't get too weird on me, okay?" he said.

"I promise," I said, crossing my heart, and hoping I could keep it.

Five days later I woke up in my room; the alarm was buzzing, as usual, at 7:05 a.m. So far, so good, I thought as my head cleared; just a couple more days and the month will be gone. And no nightmares the night before. I turned on the light and reached for my water jug.

There was a small pile of cash on the nightstand.

Ten seconds later I was pounding on Matt's bedroom door.

"Wake up!" I yelled. I tried, unsuccessfully, to remember the night before. *Please, Matt, have something to tell me . . .*

Matt believed life begins at ten a.m. Wake him up before then, and your life ends. "What?" he mumbled through the door, sleep still firmly in control.

"What happened last night?" I shouted.

An unintelligible mumble. Then silence. Then a soft snore.

"MATT!!!" I kicked the door hard; something hit the floor, and Matt cursed loudly. "Talk to me, dammit! What happened last night?"

"You were unbelievable. Gimme five more minutes, please? It was a long night . . ." I heard a yawn, then more snoring.

Further pounding did no good. At least Matt had been there to see it; I would get some answers soon. I went to the kitchen to make coffee and add up my latest windfall. An absurd thought popped into my head between sips: "You too can make money in your sleep..." I spewed coffee and laughed uncontrollably for several minutes before I managed to calm down.

When Matt finally made it to the kitchen, he told me everything. "We were walking out of Alondra 6—"

"I thought we were going to the Angels game." I

interrupted.

"We couldn't get tickets, so we watched *Aladdin* instead. Anyway, as we left the theater you started doing bits from it. I mean, *whole* bits. Voices and everything."

"Whose voices?"

"All of 'em. Bird, genie, bad guy, boy, girl, everyone. And you were doing 'em perfect, too. Then you started doing stuff that wasn't in the show, with the same voices. The people in line for tickets started watching us, and you really got off on it, started joking around with them. It was like we were at the Improv or something, Mikey; you were like Robin Williams out there."

I stared at him, unable to speak.

He shook his head, smiling. "Normally you're scared outta your shorts in front of people — don't lie, I remember graduation. Last night, though . . . you surprised the hell outta me. Those people were laughing themselves sick, and you looked like you were having the time of your life."

"You're kidding," I managed to squeak out.

"Sorry, dude. You told me to tell you if you did anything strange, and last night couldn't get much stranger. Not in a bad way, though; it was great seeing you have so much fun. It's about time, if you ask me."

I had trouble swallowing my toast; I took a long sip of coffee, and burned my tongue. "Wh-what happened next?"

Matt ate a spoonful of Grape Nuts and took infuriatingly long to swallow. "Some people in line gave you their ticket money to keep you there. One old guy said, 'Screw Oliver Stone; this boy's worth seven bucks.' You went on for like a half an hour, until the theater people asked us to leave. Someone in line gave me his card and said I should take you to Igby's. He told me, 'Tell Casey I sent you, and he'll give your friend some stage time.'"

"Matt, this isn't funny. The Igby's?" Igby's was one of the best comedy clubs in southern California.

"That's the one. I almost crashed twice on the way, you had me laughing so hard. Casey saw the card and gave you a few minutes at the late show. Man, you *killed*. The headliner — he did that HBO special last month — *refused* to follow you. You did more than an hour up there; Casey was so impressed he gave you a hundred bucks and offered you a spot on Monday night."

In the pile of money on my nightstand I had found two crisp fifty-dollar bills. I started to feel nauseous. "This can't be happening. . . ." I said, mostly to myself.

"Mikey, I know you hate crowds. But cross my heart, you were *addicted* to them last night; you were a comedy machine. Hell, maybe it was just a case of Full Moon Fever. Whatever it was, I hope I'm there next time you do it. I haven't laughed so hard in my life."

I stared at him while he concentrated on his cereal. It was too incredible to believe, but still The nightmares, the nagging elementary school memory, the incessant cadence of "One Tin Soldier" What did he

mean by Full Moon Fever?

"Matt?" I asked. "Was it a full moon last night?"

"Mmm-hmmm," he mumbled through his Grape Nuts.

I ran into the bedroom and grabbed my Day Timer. I looked at the day before . . . it was a full moon. I paged back to the night before I'd awakened on the school steps. Also a full moon. Back another month to the morning in the park. Three-for-three.

My hands were trembling. I paged back to the night I was mugged. The Day Timer fell to the floor, and I soon followed.

As I screamed, a poem repeated itself in my mind, like a mantra of the damned:

Even a man who's pure of heart

And says his prayers at night

May become a Comic when the wolfsbane blooms

And the moon is full and bright.

I vaguely remembered paramedics strapping me into a stretcher and injecting me with something, and the world going black. While I was out, I dreamed. I was on a stage again, which bore a striking resemblance to the one at Igby's. I was talking and smiling and screaming happily and gesturing, and the crowd applauded wildly and cheered and convulsed with laughter. I saw the crowd through my on-stage eyes; I noticed myself in the audience, shouting at me to stop, as I had in prior dreams. But I wouldn't — couldn't — stop. Then I saw the me on stage from the me in the crowd, and my soul froze; I had the fierce eyes, and the hellish wolf-like grin, of the mugger at Santa Monica beach.

When I awoke, screaming, I was strapped into a hospital bed. Matt and Dr. Simons were standing nearby.

I burst into tears. "Doc, what's *happening* to me?" Did I just say "Doc"? That was a first. Dr. Simons noticed this as well.

"We don't know, Michael. Matthew told me what happened last night. That isn't at all like you."

My temples throbbed; the tears stopped, and I saw red. "Oh, *brilliant* deduction, Watson," I said, my voice dripping sarcasm. "You been sharing Sherlock's needle again?" The instant I said it, I turned pale and ached to take the words back.

Dr. Simons stiffened; I couldn't have hurt him more with a blunt instrument. I saw a twenty-year relationship falling apart in an instant. "Doctor, I'm sorry," I said weakly, but he was walking out the door.

Matt looked at me in shock. "That was cold, Mike."

Matt looked up to Dr. Simons as much as I did. "Honest, Matt, I didn't mean it." I tried choking back tears. "I swear I didn't mean it." The tears won, and my whole body shook, rattling the bed frame. My world was falling apart; whether it was lack of sleep or lunacy or rabies, I didn't know or care; I just wanted it to end.

Matt's look softened. "I know. I'll go talk to him." He left the room, and I surrendered to the tears until sleep reclaimed me.

Dr. Simons was almost as quick to forgive as Matt. Matt stopped by frequently and stayed for hours, and managed to avoid talking about our "night on the town." At least with me. I knew he was telling *someone*, though; before I left, half the hospital was calling me Robin Williams Jr. Igby's made a habit of taping its shows, and a copy of my performance had somehow been passed around. The reviews were glowing.

This did *not* cheer me up.

After two days, Dr. Simons decided I was "stable" and authorized my release. Matt drove me home from the hospital; his car stereo was tuned to the classic rock station, as usual, but the volume was turned way down so we could talk. John Fogerty was singing "Centerfield."

"Back to the apartment?" he asked. "Lisa made a cake. We can invite a few people, watch a video . . ." I bristled. "You know, some obscure depressing French film. Or maybe an action flick."

"Thanks, but my parents want me to stay with them for a while."

"That's cool. So what happens next?"

I shrugged. "They should get the tests back in a few days; they're checking for everything this time. And they reserved an observation room for me the next full moon." I laughed bitterly. "You could be famous, Matt. Your best friend is a werewolf."

Matt laughed too. "*Were-comic* sounds better. You didn't sprout hair, you just got damned funny. I can think of worse diseases."

"Yeah, but I'm only funny on a full moon." I tried to laugh. "Well, at least I can pick up some extra cash every lunar month."

"Speaking of extra cash . . . you still on for Igby's tomorrow night?"

I saw red again. I wanted to bite him. I mean, hit him. "There's no way in—"

"Sorry. How about if we go and *watch* the show?"

I was about to protest, but decided against it. I sighed and nodded. "*Just* to watch, okay?"

"You got it. I'll call them tonight."

"Centerfield" ended, and the deejay announced the next song, "Bad Moon Rising."

"Hey, they're playing our song!" Matt said with a goofy smile that quickly faded at my expression. He turned off the radio quickly and we drove in silence the rest of the way home.

Casey was disappointed but understanding; he gave us complimentary tickets to the early show. Fortunately, Casey said, there were literally thousands of comics in L.A. begging for stage time, and filling my spot — even on such short notice — wouldn't be difficult.

We took a front row table, over my objections. I looked around before the show started; I had no memory of performing here, and the thought of doing so knotted my stomach. The room was *huge*.

The emcee was a celebrity, the co-star of a

recently-canceled sitcom. He talked a lot about his old show, and begged campily for any producers in the audience to take pity on him. He wasn't very funny, and the crowd response was lukewarm.

The opening act I recognized from HBO comedy specials and Comic Strip Live; she was hilarious, and I laughed a lot, momentarily forgetting my troubles. The audience loved her; she did close to a half hour of material, most of which I'd never heard before.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," said the emcee after the crowd gave the opener yet another round of applause, "please welcome to the stage with a big hand, the Rottweiler of Comedy . . . Johnny Gonzo!!!"

I'd never heard of him, but the crowd went wild. Matt and I looked at each other and shrugged, then applauded.

When the man leaped to the stage and grabbed the microphone, my blood froze.

"Hey," Matt whispered, "he looks familiar . . ." Then he gasped as recognition set in. "Damn . . . I didn't know comedy was contagious."

I nearly hit him until I saw his expression; he wasn't trying to be funny. In fact, he was trembling, staring in horror at the man at the mike. At the bloodshot eyes and feral grin of the Rottweiler of Comedy.

Johnny Gonzo began his act, and the audience responded enthusiastically. Matt and I were too busy watching the guy with fear and loathing to listen. I didn't know whether to run away or jump onto the stage and beat him to death. The last three months were starting to make sense.

Sitting on the front row of a comedy club and not laughing is like wearing a target to a firing range. Eventually the comic noticed us.

"Hey, here's a party table! What's wrong, boys? You need a translator? How 'bout a Buttweed-to-English dictionary?" The crowd laughed.

"I . . . I, uh . . ." I stammered.

"I . . . I, uh . . ." he mimicked with a sneer. "I, uh" what? Ayatollah?" Loud laughter. People often laugh because it's funny. They also laugh when it's someone other than them being picked on.

I wasn't laughing. I was too busy stammering.

"I, uh . . ."

" . . . been working on the railroad? What are you trying to say?"

"I . . ."

The guy on stage pointed at us with a sweeping gesture. "Ladies and gentlemen, the Idaho delegation of Mensa is with us tonight! Give them a hand!" Laughter, rebel yells, and applause.

The comic picked on us some more, then went on with his act. My heart was pounding, pumping adrenaline throughout my system. I felt like I'd been violated by him. Again.

Something snapped in my head; it was like a door being blown apart from the inside. I lurched forward in

my seat as a wave of memories washed forcefully through my consciousness, sloshing around and demanding immediate attention.

The night in the park . . . on campus . . . outside the movie theater. Even here in Igby's. I saw myself dancing around, waving my arms, making faces, cracking jokes. I heard the laughter of the people watching me. I saw the money thrown at my feet, heard the applause, felt the handshakes and hugs of appreciation — and the eager lips and probing tongues of groupie lust. I saw myself sinking down in exhaustion as the people walked away smiling, as if their very presence gave me my strength and their departure robbed me of it. Some staggered away and tried to recover their breath as I lost consciousness where I stood, only to awake the next morning, oblivious to what I'd done or been.

Making people laugh . . . it was a good thing, wasn't it? Tonight's opener had made me forget my troubles for a time. Why shouldn't I be happy to have sent so many away laughing? As my mind sorted through the memories, I saw that some of my jokes had been cruel, and I recalled seeing more than one pained look. A few jokes had been directed at faces in the crowd, targeting them as if I were exacting vengeance for some past wrong. Some of these bystanders had familiar faces, similar to ones I remembered from that elementary school concert. I replayed my cruel behavior in detail; it's as if I was fighting for the right to be the focus of attention again, erasing my childhood humiliation one teardrop at a time.

I hated myself for these attacks. And I hated the man on stage who had done this to me.

Johnny Gonzo decided to notice us again. I didn't realize I was blushing. "You really need to lower the octane level of those drinks, Gomer; I could fry eggs on your forehead." He smiled sippily, said, "Golly!" drunkenly, and the audience roared. He had no reason to expect me to respond any better than I had last time.

The first time he'd attacked me in Santa Monica, I was caught off guard. The second time, from the stage, I was in shock. Now, though, my mind was working on all cylinders, and I wanted blood.

"When's the last time you had your shots, Cujo?" I asked loudly. His sneer faded. A couple of people laughed, but I ignored them. I locked my gaze on Gonzo; I was determined to make him suffer. I felt some shame for this desire, but my fury was in firm control.

The battle had begun.

"Ooooh," he said sarcastically. "Gomer's a heckler! Gonna throw spuds at the stage now?"

I smiled. "You know, I find it amazing that of all those millions of sperm . . . *you* won. I can only imagine it was a mercy fertilization." THWACK! He stepped back as if struck. The audience roared.

"Hey pal," he said nervously, "I don't give you a rough time at your job when you're giving your customers their McChange . . ." Sporadic laughter.

"You should really consider wearing turtlenecks,

Johnny," I said, "to hide those circumcision scars." Some enthusiastic groans, and even more cheers. They were on my side now; I felt a fresh rush of adrenaline. Getting laughs wasn't so bad, and I had Gonzo on the ropes.

He was speechless. His face went blank. "I, uh . . ." he stammered.

"I, uh, *what*?" I shot back. "Iawatha? Yer Honor, I uhbject!" The audience howled. I relished the irony of using his own joke against him, and the laughter was intoxicating. I looked over to Matt's seat, but he was gone.

Gonzo's eyes blazed with a mix of terror and fury; his lips curled and his teeth ground together as he clenched the microphone like a bludgeon. He didn't even look human anymore; he more closely resembled a cornered animal. It was the look he had given me after he'd knocked me down three months before, and I felt a momentary chill before my own rage reasserted itself.

"You wouldn't recognize a joke if it bit you on the ass," he growled. Nobody laughed. A few people booed. He weakened visibly.

"No, but I'd recognize the ass who bit me on the shoulder," I snapped back, smiling demonically. "You still singing soprano, Cujo?"

Every vestige of arrogance fled his face; I noted the pure terror with satisfaction as recognition set in. "You're . . . you're the guy!"

"You screwed up my life, Johnny," I said. I stood. "And now it's my turn."

I imitated Sylvester Stallone: "I'm your worst nightmare." Some laughter from the crowd; the professional drinkers in the audience were now completely sauced and determined to laugh at everything. I did another Stallone impression: "You're the disease, and I'm the cure." More sporadic laughter. I looked around; many people looked confused, but a few seemed to think we were a tag-team act.

Johnny Gonzo started crying. "I'm sorry, man . . . I'm so sorry . . ." Heavy sobs. "I used to be a teacher. I got bit a couple years ago in Phoenix, and next thing I know I'm on the road performing. Four months ago I . . . I just went crazy. I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . ."

I wanted so much to hate him, but my anger was rapidly draining away. If what he was saying was true, he was a victim like me. Could I blame him for attacking me? Might as well get pissed off at a mosquito for feeding off your blood while you slept. I looked at the weeping figure on the stage, and our eyes met again; this time, I felt no fear, no fury . . . only understanding. The look in his eyes now matched those I'd seen in the mirror almost every day the past several months.

"I'm sorry too," I said sincerely. "It's not your fault you're a comic." I had no more anger in me, and now that I knew what was going on my fear diminished.

Matt entered the room with three police officers; he pointed towards the stage. They took the weeping Gonzo away in handcuffs as the shocked audience watched. Someone at the back of the room shouted, "Bravo!" and

started applauding as if Johnny Gonzo and I were doing Hamlet shtick; did he honestly think this was part of the show?

Hell, why not?

I jumped on the stage, grabbed the microphone, bowed theatrically and announced in a Dodger Stadium Public Address System voice, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Elvis has left the building!" I pointed to the exit through which the police and Gonzo had left. The guy in back howled his approval.

"Howdy, folks," I said. "My name is Mike McNeal, and I'm your real headliner for tonight. Johnny and I planned this; normal intros are so boring and besides — let's face it — the emcee sucks." More laughter as I impersonated the emcee as his television character, using some of his best-known tag lines. The emcee, standing in the doorway, winced and grinned sheepishly. "The cops came in when things started to drag; hell, it always worked for Monty Python." More laughter, and a few Arsenio-style woofs. The drunks were happy again. I basked in the attention.

"How about a big round of applause," I shouted, "for the Rottweiler of Comedy, Johnny Gonzo?" Loud applause. "Bring him back in, guys!" I shouted, and the police dragged Johnny in — confused, but no longer sobbing — for a quick bow. I decided then to not press charges against him. We needed to have a long talk; I had to find out what I was in for. The uncertainty of what had happened to me was gone, but the future still scared me....

But first, the present. There were people to entertain. I noticed Casey as he gave me a thumbs-up.

"Sit back, folks; the show has just begun. Johnny will get his booster shots and be back tomorrow night, as rowdy and rabid as ever." Cheers. I was grinning like a madman.

"Some of you still have that look on your face like, 'is this Greek Tragedy night?'" I put the microphone close to my mouth and in an announcer's voice intoned, "Tonight on Masterjoke theater, Oedipus kills the headliner, marries the opener and fathers the emcee before dying tragically from a shorted-out microphone." I then faked electrocution and fell on the stage, launching into a long soliloquy in Classic style on the horrors of comedy inbreeding before gasping my last.

I didn't know if it made sense, but they were laughing.

I hopped back up, Bruce Lee style. "We need to get that Kumbaya feeling back here, people, so follow along." I started chanting in a low voice, "comedy, comedy, co-me-dy." My right arm — the wounded shoulder was throbbing now — churned in a steady rhythm to the words. I continued until the audience was chanting along, and I pumped up the volume until the pictures on the walls rattled. Jay Leno's headshot shook loose and fell to the floor. When everyone was chanting in unison I let loose with a howl that pierced through the racket, and soon they were howling too. They were in the

palm of my hand; everyone knew it, and loved it.

"There's a bad moon rising, folks, and what's his name?"

"MIKEY!" they shouted. More howling.

And then the show *really* began.

I conjured comedy routines from thin air; I told jokes, did impressions, sang silly songs. I told them of my horrific elementary school choir experience, exaggerating beyond belief, even improvising a parody of "One Tin Soldier" — mocking my childhood nightmare, purging my soul of that festering demon forever. As I told the story, I found myself laughing along. I was free! Twenty years of anguish and denial now filtered through a comic lens and dissipated into harmless memory. A crowd had once laughed at the child, and wounded me; a crowd now laughed for the man, and made me whole.

The jokes and the laughter became a part of me, woven inextricably into my DNA. I knew I would never forget this night, and even sleep could not steal these memories from me as they had three times before. The crowd laughed, cheered and applauded, the earlier tension in the room forgotten.

My jokes were not so cruel now; my rage and fear were gone, washed away in a tidal wave of goodwill. Yes, I picked on people in the crowd, using a bald head, a cowboy hat or a loud sweater to launch into a new routine, but not maliciously; every victim laughed along, their faces registering no injury, able to enjoy their participation in the intricate symphony of mirth.

Only the crowd mattered. Their energy flowed into me; my blood churned and boiled like the base of Niagara Falls, and I ached to please them, to feed off their adulation until they went home satisfied and I sank to the floor torpid from the feast. Their laughter nourished me, sustained me. *Iocor ergo sum*; I joke, therefore I am.

I couldn't imagine not performing for the rest of my life. All I could think of was the next laugh, and my only fear was that it wouldn't come.

—JAMES L. WRIGHT, JR.

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SACRIFICE

By L. S. SILVERTHORNE

Illustrated by Hart

Matana slipped into the thick burgundy dress. Of all her dresses, this one would be the best for dying. She glanced out the window for a moment, watching red dust swirl across the ridge and disappear in an umber puff. There she would await the dragon — and sacrifice her life for her people. For eight cycles of the sun, the silvery white creature had preyed on the city, reducing sandstone dwellings — and anyone in the way — to ash. It would take the turn of many suns to build up the herds again and to bury all the dead. Seemed like a lifetime since Zand had shoved her ahead of him into the street as the great dragon surged across the sky in a blue-white streak. She had heard his scream and the roar of flame, but when the red dust twisted up into the sky, their home was nothing but gray ash. Yesterday, she had scattered Zand's ashes across the ridge. He would be with her tonight when she faced the dragon. The dry, rough scent of the knitted fabric made her eyes water and her skin itch. Zand had given her this dress. For traveling, he had said. The heavy material prevented the chilly sand showers from pocking her skin, protecting her until— Yes, this was a dress for dying.

When the sun fell away from the amber sky, Matana rushed out into the frigid night air. Quickly, she draped

a thick gray scarf over her head and across her mouth. The cold wind swished across the brick red sands, erasing the whisper of her footsteps. She held the scarf tighter against her face and made her way over the ridge, envying those disappearing steps in the sand. They slipped away in silence, leaving no past and no future.

Beyond the ridge, a stretch of brittle sandstone, scorched by the dragon's fire, broke through the smooth sands like a fractured bone. She toed a circle that had been burned into the stone and a cold shiver arced through her body, chilling sweat-laden skin. Her heart pulsed and she prayed that it would just stop. Many times, her people had tried to stop the dragon's destruction, but every time, they were turned to ash in moments. The dragon never paused to hear their cries of mercy. It just destroyed. The apathetic creature with large blank eyes and twitching pupils simply destroyed.

Last night, in the square, there had been talk of a sacrifice, but when no one volunteered, they decided to face the creature together. The whole town would face it one last time. Matana had embraced the idea of sacrifice in silence. Zand would have been pleased by her decision. Her people would be angry at first, but that would pass if her life appeased the dragon's appetite. Tonight, as it had done for several cycles, it would circle the city, swoop down to burn and destroy, and then shoot back into the air, spewing fire. Even now, the smell of burnt grain lingered on the sands and in the air. She knew it would come back tonight. And she would be ready. With two rocks anchored firmly in her fingers. If

she could blind it, even while it killed her, perhaps she could save the city.

For a long while, she stood on the edge of a thick black scorch mark and waited, waited for the stark white dragon to soar through the sky toward the ridge. Without warning, the ground began to rumble. Cold fear numbed her fingertips and her heart pressed against her throat as she stretched her hands toward the sky. She would be with Zand soon. Soon, but she would try to take this creature with her. With a deafening roar, the white dragon sizzled across the sky. Abruptly, a screech rippled through the silence and Matana dug her heels into the ground, dread pressing against her body. It sounded like a great wind and Matana closed her eyes, hoping the creature would kill her swiftly. Already, she felt its blistering heat rolling across the ground. She drew back her arm and let the first rock fly.

"Roger, Houston . . . approaching landing site." The

anxious astronaut surveyed the dusty ridge ahead, eager to land. He would be one of the first humans to set foot on Mars. "The eight probe sweeps we did of the area confirm our long range scans . . . if there's life here, we're within meters of it."

A sharp crack echoed through the ship. One of the astronauts watched as the small satellite receiver snapped off.

"Houston, we've lost visuals!"

A metallic crunch followed and the radar winked out.

"Radar's gone. We're going down hard, Houston! Repeat, we're going down hard."

As the nose of the ship gouged into the ground, the astronaut shuddered at the thought of being one of the first humans to die on Mars.

—L.S. SILVERTHORNE

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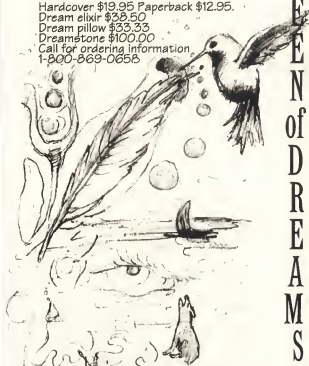
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Heather Valencia

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a Yaqui dreaming woman . . .



SYRUP OF GREEP

By GREG COSTIKYAN

Illustrated by Valencia

It seems so long ago that I roamed the hills of Hamster-Dzorzia. The world was young then, soft spring winds wafting eastward with the hint of rain, young flowers nodding in the meadows, the greeps putting forth their first green fruit. There were winters. And scorching days. And hours of labor totting up figures in dusty rooms. But that isn't what sticks in the memory. It's the skirl of pipes, the coolness of the gloaming, the scent of new greek-blossoms.

Here and there, about the land, traces of elven magic lingered. There was power slowly dying with the elves' absence, but still enough to support the greek.

And its fruit; ah, its fruit. If you haven't tasted fresh, new-plucked greek right off the vine, you have no inkling of nirvana! Tart, but not too tart; sweet, but not too sweet.

The greek is a delicate fruit, and perishes quickly. It must be preserved, then pickled, jellied and bottled. You can get greek vinegar, greek schnapps — and what household doesn't have a pot of greek syrup?

My father was a *haute bourgeois*, a trader in greek. He shipped it fresh by fast pony, to Hamsterburg, where gourmets dined on its exquisite flesh. There was great demand for greek. Among true connoisseurs, it's well-known that different soils breed different taste: greek grown by a magic spring tastes of the cool freshness of the waters, while those grown where a

basilisk nests have a pungent, earthy scent. My father was always on the lookout for magical places where the greek could grow, for each new site meant a slightly different taste — a new variety for his demanding clientele.

I saw him seldom; he was constantly on his rounds, and paused only briefly in the little market village we called home.

It was his absence that gave me my freedom. I was sixteen, that spring. On a soft spring morning, I would sneak away from my chamber, before the hour at which I was required to meet my tutor, and roam the hills.

Often I would meet Rudy; he had a quality of sober joy I found ceaselessly fascinating, a keen intelligence he applied to our amusement, and a reckless daring that kept me in awe. In the best of circumstances, I think he would have wound up dead, or imprisoned, for he was sort of boy who would steal the clappers from the bells of the town clock, make off with women's clothes while they bathe, and casually pocketed merchandise while the shopkeeper looks elsewhere; not, I think, the sort of boy who would make a success of himself in the sober world.

We would climb the hills, swim in the streams, taunt bulls, play jokes and otherwise amuse ourselves. His skin was fair, his arms speckled with a light golden down, his face chiseled in such exquisite lines that, more than once, despite our friendship, I was overwhelmed by shyness in his presence, a diffidence his sudden grin would instantly shatter. Together, we roamed the spring-soft hills, and took pleasure in each other as young friends will.

One of our favorite places was an oak grove, down in the fold between two hills, where a little stream ran.

The stream marked the boundary between two peasants' property, which was why the grove had not been felled to make room for crops. Perhaps also — superstitious as peasants often are — they sensed some power lurking there.

The tall oaks dated from as long ago as the age of elven dominion. The ground was carpeted with soft leaf mold, dotted with harder acorns. The trees abounded with squirrels, chipmunks, and various birds who survived on the *mast* the oaks produced; it was a veritable little forest, one of the last great stands of trees, nestled amidst acres and acres of cultivated land. Even in the hottest days of summer, the high branches of the trees cast a cool, green shade within the grove, a shade we found inviting. Often, in the afternoon, we'd go there, drink at the stream, make a rude lunch of bread and cheese, and lie together, sending our imaginations soaring outward beyond the distant stars in the green dimness of the grove.

After dinner, I went out into the gloaming. The sky had turned that strange indigo color that painters try so hard to capture on canvas — the luminous fading of the light, a time magical and glimmering in the unknown. I knew the grove as a place of green dimness, but in this already-dim light, it now seemed dark, mysterious. As I entered, I heard the sound of voices: Rudy's, and — a girl's.

Surprised that he would bring a wench to our private place, I crept softly toward the stream, hiding behind the trees. And there was Rudy with — with a creature. Oh, female, to be sure; but hardly human. Her skin was pastel viridian, her hair bedecked with long, fine, willow-like leaves, her eyes of a definite elven cast. She moved with a catlike litheness, and she and Rudy were obviously entranced.

Astonished, I could hardly move, but watched — crouching behind the bole of an oak — while they murmured to each other, Rudy mustering the full force of his enormous charm. It hardly seemed necessary, for her intentions matched his, and by the time full darkness fell, they were in each others' arms. It was new moon's darkness in the oak grove, the trees obscuring the meager star-light. I saw little, and after a while, heard only their soft breathing.

I stumbled away, half in pain, half in rage. Rudy had defiled our place, had defiled what we had together, and had done it, moreover, with a creature not even of our own *kind*. Why did I react with such intensity? It is hard to say why, now, so long after. Certainly, Rudy had had wenches before; he was a careless, charming lad, of respectable family, and had induced many of the local girls to spend an hour or two with him, in a hayloft, or amid the soft greenery of the meadow. And that had never bothered me, for I had known that they meant nothing to Rudy, nothing more than an afternoon's pleasure, nothing by comparison to what we shared. But this — I sensed, even from that moment — this was different.

And it was. He grew distant; the intimacy we had shared was gone. He never once mentioned his elven lover, but I could see her swimming in his eyes, his attention far off; he'd gather wildflowers and take them to the grove. He'd bring nuts and berries for the squirrels and lie there, his back to an oak tree, for hours at a time, staring upward into the leaves and sighing. It was clear, not only in his actions, but in his lack of action, his unwillingness to roam with me, to play the games that were our wont, that he'd been thoroughly captivated by that creature, enraptured in her spell, and what we had once shared was gone forever.

I began to hate him as only one whose love has been betrayed can hate; to hate him nearly as much as I loathed that inhuman, green thing with which he lay. That was when I began to plot my revenge.

The greep grows only in magical soil, and even in Hamster-Dzorzia, there were few enough places where it could be grown. Fell those few trees, and the grove would be a perfect place for a stand of vines — rich, bottom land, well-watered by the stream, the soil imbued with magic. Moreover, none of the greep orchards from which my father bought were planted in a dryad's former grove; the taste of greeps planted there would differ, would provide my father with a new variety with which to titillate the jaded palates of even the *urbs*.

And as it happened, father was home.

I told him what I knew. Not of Rudy, nor what had passed between him and the dryad; but of her *presence*, of the grove's power. My father slapped me on the back and, I think, for the first time in my life, he was proud of me. Merchant that he was, he began at once to ponder how best to acquire the property, how to obtain it from the peasants who tilled the adjoining fields without alerting them to its value.

I slept soundly that night, savoring my victory. If I couldn't have Rudy, I could betray him just as I had been betrayed. The next day, I met him on the hill overlooking the town, and told him what I'd done.

All color drained from his face. "No," he said, "you couldn't have!" When I insisted I had, and provided corroborating detail, he struck me full on the face, a sudden vicious blow. I had not expected it, and it flung me to the ground. I lost consciousness for a while, and when I awoke, found a reddening bruise about one eye.

That very afternoon, I went out to the grove in the company of my father, with two woodsmen and a sorcerer, the latter to protect us if the dryad proved to have unexpected powers, and the woodsmen to begin to fell the grove. They set to work on the outer trees, while I went with my father inward, to show him the stream, the largest oak wherein, I thought, the dryad made her home —

Oh, what dolor greeted us there. Where there had been green coolness was warm blood, black in the darkness of the grove. And there was cold grey steel driven through Rudy's belly, his pale flesh lifeless upon the moss growing beneath the tree. I cried out, ran to

him, cradled his head; but it was too late. Life had hours ago departed from his form.

My father scowled, cursed under his breath, hauled me away, saw the tears coursing down my cheeks, and slapped me, hard. I think he understood it all, in that moment, understood that Rudy and I had been more than friends, understood what Rudy had done with the creature of the wood. He was disgusted; he despised me, as I think he always had, an unforgiving man. But worse, the grove was ruined. Rudy's blood would taint the soil, the greeps would be worthless if we grew them there. They would forever taste of metal, blood and death; they would win no praises at the tables of the city.

He called the woodsmen to halt, and hauled me roughly away from Rudy's form. He swore to kill me if I let the townsfolk know of my — unnatural desires, he called them; odd how natural they seemed, by comparison with Rudy's, and he told me he would banish me from my home. I hardly cared.

Rudy had known what his blood would do; though there were wheat fields, apiaries, and vineyards in Hamster-Dzorzia, the lifeblood of its commerce depended on the greep, and we had known its ways from infancy. He had slain himself, not out of despair, but out of love; not in mourning for the loss of his dryad, but to protect her from the axe. He had cheated me of my

vengeance. And most of all, he made me realize that I, too, had never been more than a passing fancy, for him, little more than just another of his girls; would he ever have sacrificed his life for mine, as he did for the spirit of the oak?

Had *she* planned this from the start? Had she known that, in this region, it was merely a matter of time before she, as had happened to all her dryad sisters, would also fall to the axe? Had she *plotted* all this as a means of mere survival — betrayed Rudy as fully as I?

From high in the oak's stately branches, I caught a hint of a laughing face, a sardonic glint of the eye; the dryad looked down, mocking me.

—GREG COSTIKYAN

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THAT'S PROGRESS

By LYN NICHOLS

Illustrated by Elston

"**H**ey, Mikal!"

The shout was a welcomed interruption. I dropped another fist-sized stone into my bag and turned toward the voice. Ilmer — my best friend — waved from the road. He was driving a pony-drawn cart. I dragged my rock-filled bag toward him. Dust rose with every step and hung in the still, hot air.

"Hi Ilmer. Little late for bread delivery, isn't it?" I said, dropping the heavy bag with a sigh. Ilmer was the baker's apprentice. I stretched tired muscles and felt the tingle of sunburned skin on my shoulders.

"It's not bread," Ilmer answered. "Ever since my master bought one of those speaking-stone inventions from your master, I've been doing three and four deliveries a day! That thing has made my life miserable!"

"Why?" I asked. "The Talkie-Rocks are supposed to make things easier." I am, of course, the Wizard's apprentice. "No more running messages all over the city."

"Yeah. But delivery requests are coming in at all hours, now." He sighed and wiped sweat from his brow. "Before Master got that chatter-rock, I just delivered bread in the mornings. Now, it's 'Lord So-and-So needs this,' or, 'Lady Such-and-Brother wants that.' And, of course, it's all in a hurry.

"And then, Master got this idea to add a new product. He calls it 'quick-food.'" Ilmer indicated the back of the cart, and I saw a strange wooden box with little doors. Steam rose from the cracks and shimmered in the hot, summer air.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's to keep the quick-food orders warm while I deliver them." He looked up the hill toward the manors and mansions of the City Lords. "At least those blasted rockie-talks are so big and expensive that only the rich can afford them." He sighed and shook the reins. "I've got to go. Master will skin me if I don't meet the promised delivery times. Bye."

"See you later," I said. He clucked to the pony and they started up the hill.

I watched as the cart moved up the road. I didn't tell Ilmer that my master had discovered a way to empower smaller stones, or that the smaller Talkie-Rocks would be less expensive. My master had a dream that soon everyone in the city would have a Talkie-Rock. 'Progress,' he called it. Ilmer turned and waved.

I waved back, then hefted my bag of fist-sized stones — wincing as the canvas rubbed my sunburned shoulder — and started the long walk back to my master's house. As I walked, I had to laugh. Ilmer thought he was busy now? He's going to miss these days of three and four deliveries when word of my master's new invention gets out. He can't read, of course, so he probably doesn't know that the new sign tacked to the back of the baker's cart says: "Kingdom Pizza, We Deliver."

—LYN NICHOLS



THE DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

By GREGORY FITZ GERALD

Illustrated by Tom X

By late afternoon the stock market closed. Not waiting for the west coast exchange, stock broker Shane Conlan lifted his suit jacket from the chair back and pulled it on over his vest. He wore a pin-striped blue suit, white shirt, muted blue tie, and Bostonian black shoes, shined that morning to mirror reflection, but now scuffed. Lithe and twenty-four, clean shaven and short haired, Shane Conlan straightened his back to achieve his full 5'11", pushed his chest out, sucked in his stomach in one final effort at the close of another hard day.

The tote board had ceased its incessant clicking, the European exchanges had long been closed, so he put on his black Homburg hat, tossed his *Wall Street Journal* into the waste basket, and walked past the cashier's cage, waving good night to the cashiers. Shane Conlan walked jauntily out through the lobby to the elevators.

As soon as he'd left the building, his whole body slumped.

The subway proved so crowded that Shane stood up all the way to Charles Street, where the woman seated

just in front of him got up and stepped off, allowing him to slump down exhaustedly into the vacant seat. He looked around at the normal going-home crowd: the tired faces, the service men just mustered out, the few women in high heels hanging on straps, men studiously ignoring them, unwilling to surrender seats.

Shane's head lolled forward, chin on chest, thinking about the rising cost of automobiles, Fords priced as high as \$1,500, and still not widely available at that inflated price. He dozed, nodded, then gradually fell asleep.

In his sleep Shane felt the train lurch to a halt at Harvard Square, line's end, and awoke. At first everything whirled about in an awakening daze, then his green eyes began to focus, noticing everything seemed different. The car itself seemed altered, somehow newer, and he marked a different ethnic mix than before: Negroes, Asians, Mexicans in their odd-looking clothes, their strange modes of gesturing and even walking.

Shane wondered, shook his head to clear it, and stood up to experience a sharp pain in his right knee. He reached down to run it and noticed his hands — now gnarled, thin-skinned, blotched with brown spots and raised, bluish veins. His gaze, he noticed, didn't seem too clear — but remained faintly clouded, even after rubbing his eyes. Absorbed in considering these facts, he reached the top of the stairs where, as custom dictated, he bought the evening *Globe*. Glancing at the headline ("MID-EAST PEACE PACT"), the completely different make-up appearance of the newspaper startled him. Then he saw the date:

November 15, 1993. In a state of shock he crossed the street crowded with futuristic vehicles not at all like those he'd seen at the New York World's Fair. As if in a dream and in the dark, he entered Harvard Yard wondering: My God, what has happened?

In the Yard everything seemed familiar again. The beating of his heart, accelerating at observing the mod cars and wrinkled hands (now tucked safely into his pockets), had calmed. The knee pain gradually lessened as he walked through the dark yard.

Strange, he'd not noticed the construction project on his way to work this morning. The tall, unlighted concrete building appeared to be nearing completion. He sighed as he neared his house on Ware Street, feeling for the key, tugging it out of his pocket just before mounting the steps.

He tried to insert the key in the lock but couldn't. How odd, he thought, the key won't fit. He leaned down to look more closely in the weak light and saw the lock had been changed to a newer, shinier one. His key wouldn't work.

A momentary pang: could he have come to the wrong house in the darkness? They all looked alike, he remembered. The street contained more than a dozen red brick row houses built in the 1890's; so he stepped backward to examine the facade again. The number — yes, the number twenty-four — exactly the same. What could be wrong?

Fighting acceptance of change, Shane decided his wife must have changed the lock. He rang the bell, heard its different tone echo inside. Then after a long wait, he heard footsteps before the door opened. A woman of fifty or so, gray haired, ample-bosomed, with rosy cheeks, opened the door a few inches.

"Yes?" she peered warily out from behind the chain.

Shane, astonished, wondered what had happened to his wife, "Who . . . who are you?"

"I'm Mrs. Freyer. Who are you looking for?"

Shane hardly knew what to answer, "My wife and children. I . . . I . . . live here."

The woman stared wide-eyed, alarm clouding her face, "You must have the wrong house! We've lived here for twenty years." She slammed the door, rammed home the bolt.

Shane Conlan stepped back on the entry landing and stared up at the house front again. The same number: twenty-four — he knew that was right. He recognized the peculiar tilt to the roof gable, and the street seemed not unfamiliar. He shuffled down the stairs onto the cracked sidewalk again, looking back and forth, up and down the once-familiar street. Then he focused on changes. The building farther up the street appeared different. The patch of greensward in front of the next door neighbor's house had been paved over, the hedge around another neighbor's tiny lawn on the other side had vanished, the sidewalk had been repaved. None of the changes seemed recent enough to have been done today, yesterday, or even last week.

Shane trudged a few paces up the street, noticing

something different here, an alteration there — realizing at last how drastic had been the changes since he'd been at the office.

At last the truth came home: he'd lost those intervening years, and as the sky thickened toward dusk, he finally understood his complete aloneness, totally disoriented in an alien world. Studying the shriveled skin of his hands, Shane realized what had happened. He could no longer call this his home, someone else lived here now. All he could think of: where were his young wife and children? How would he begin to find them? Finally, where would he sleep tonight? Tomorrow would he find his office still where it had been?

After a few moments of painful hesitation Shane, not knowing what else to do, walked away toward the Common and the two hotels still flanking it. He crossed the Common amongst gum and candy wrappers, crumpled newspapers, used condoms, abandoned dirty underwear, and an occasional soleless shoe. He approached the Commander Hotel, entered the lobby, and enquired about a room for the night. The desk man quoted him a price in excess of one hundred dollars. Shane opened his wallet to a mere thirty dollars — what had seemed more than enough that morning. Without credit cards or other means of charging the exorbitant cost of a room, Shane left the hotel lobby and returned to the common. Slumping onto a vacant park bench, Shane pulled his overcoat tightly about him. The wind scraped old newspaper pages along the broken concrete sidewalk. Vagrants, bums, and the homeless began to infiltrate the darkened park. A bag lady sat down on the bench three feet distant, mumbled a tired greeting.

"You sleeping here tonight? This here's my sleeping bench." She began wrapping herself in old newspapers. "The one over there ain't taken yet." From a ragged sleeve pointed a dirty finger.

Shane stifled a sob and shuffled over to the other bench, where he lay himself down to sleep in his clothes.

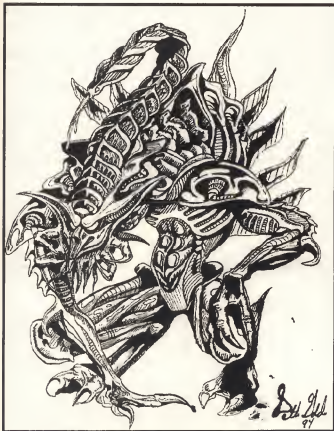
—GREGORY FITZ GERALD

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MUTANT

By MARSH CASSADY

Illustrated by S. Gold

The car began to grumble and dip, and Pierre felt a jolt of fear. He was passing the jungle, a green tangle of choking vines and undergrowth, the place where grotesque mutants lived.

Pierre hated the drive home alone at night, and to make matters worse, the full moon showed pale yellow beyond smoky clouds. This was the worst of times, a night of insanity when sleeping beasts began to stir, when hideous forms rose to stalk the night. Or so the legends said.

War had nearly decimated the earth; Pierre's grandfather talked about how lucky a small minority was to escape, at least till the mutations became apparent. The worst fled to the jungles of Balboa park, once a zoo and cultural center for the city of Diego. Yet everyone to a degree had abnormalities.

The car coughed and slowed, nearly crashing through its cushion of air. Damn mechanics anyway. They'd assured him the car was fine, just a matter of adjusting the timing.

He'd always tried to be careful. As a police inspector, he knew the dangers that could befall a lonely traveler. Strangely enough, he'd never seen the creatures that inflicted the torturous deaths on those who ventured

too close to the jungle. Even though there seemed to be an unvoiced agreement about each group keeping to its territory, citizens sometimes strayed. Usually, it was teenagers out to prove their bravery.

Pierre had seen throats ripped open by fangs or bodies cut in small pieces, most of the parts dragged off. He gripped the steering wheel. Only a mile or so till the worst was over, till he was away from danger. Headlights illuminated the path before him, a road now cracked and nearly overgrown. If only he hadn't decided to take the short cut. But he'd been delayed and had promised this time that he'd be home to see his twin sons' vid soccer game, played against a school up north in City of Angels.

He began to sweat. He glanced right, toward the jungle only yards away, creeping ever closer to the road that no one would dare fix for fear of attack.

A clanging began, and the car spit fitfully. Pierre's fingers formed bands around the steering wheel. His jaw ached with tension. He started to rock back and forth, as if the motion would somehow propel the car forward. With one last gasp, the motor died.

Milt Johnson opened his eyes and stretched. He sighed deeply and sat up. Now the change would begin, the change to power. Feelings of strength flowed through his body. He held his hands out and saw them sprout coarse hair. The fingernails narrowed, hardened into claws. Pads formed on his palms and fingers.

As blood surged within him, he ran from the sleeping cave, tore off his clothes and sniffed the powerful odors around him — must and decay, mixed with animal smells. It was good to be alive. He threw back his head and howled at the moon.

The worst had happened, and Pierre had to accept it. The decision made, his breath came easier. He glanced around to see if there was anything important he should take with him. There wasn't really. He loosened his seat belt and climbed out. No one would ever risk coming back for the car. He'd simply abandon it.

He hadn't been in this particular area of town for a couple of years, and things had deteriorated. No one knew how to keep the jungle contained. He shrugged. He wouldn't have to travel far on foot, and he was in good shape. He ran or biked each day, swam a couple of times a week. He slammed the door shut. Maybe he'd be lucky and make it.

Milt lived for the nights of the full moon. In his alternate state, huddled with the others in hollowed-out caves, he hoarded his strength for times such as this.

Pierre trotted along the asphalt, keeping up a steady pace. Thirty-four years old, he'd worked hard to overcome his handicap and gain his appointment as the youngest police inspector on the Diego force. Everyone was differently able now, and many simply succumbed

to failure. But not Pierre; from the time he was a child, he aimed at the police force, determined to let nothing stop him in achieving his goal.

He glanced toward the jungle, wondering what horrors lurked within. Intellectually, he could feel sorry for the beings who lived there. As the histories told, his people and the jungle inhabitants had sprung from a single common ancestry.

Pierre denied the aching of his joints, the pain caused by each additional step. In no more than two or three minutes, he knew, he'd be past the jungle. He'd make it, maybe not in time for his sons' soccer game. But there'd be other games. He listened to the plod of his feet.

Milt had never known another kind of life. Folktales had it that beyond the jungle only "normals" lived. He knew they weren't completely normal, but not so altered as he and his kind. Yet Milt enjoyed the diversity among his family and friends. By unspoken agreement, they never preyed upon one another, but upon descendants of the zoo animals. The ultimate satisfaction came in stalking and killing the occasional outsider who'd ventured too far from safety.

The only differences among those outsiders, Milt believed, was their size. Among Milt's kith and kin, there was more uniformity, which, despite the diversities, prevented bullying.

All these thoughts and more went through Milt's head as he raced toward the road at the edge of the jungle.

Pierre began to tire. Still, with each lagging step, a shot of adrenalin pumped through his system, spurring him forward. Up ahead he could see the lights of Diego, kind and protective. No jungle creatures ever ventured there. It was theorized that they feared all light except the sun's reflection on the moon.

Throat parched, sweat soaking his clothing, breath coming in heaves, Pierre shucked off his suit coat and let it fall behind him.

Milt paused and sniffed. The scent was stronger now. The hackles rose on his neck, and he growled deep in his throat. He cocked his head to listen. Someone was running, coming closer and closer.

The lust for blood was all-consuming. He'd eaten nuts and roots in his other form. It had been a month since he'd tasted blood. He could imagine his fangs ripping and tearing, and the liquid fire spraying his muzzle and face. He'd bury his nose in warm flesh and gorge until he was filled. Then once he changed back, he'd hack the body to pieces with sharpened stones and drag it back to the cave for the others to finish.

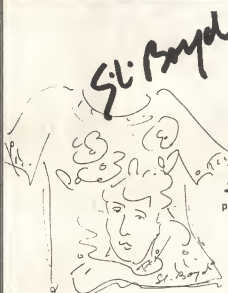
If he waited in the thicket at the near edge of the road, the normal wouldn't see him. He'd be concentrating on escape, on getting back to his family. Milt felt a wrench of sadness. He had a family too. But there was no comparison. If he didn't kill the normal, his

own family could easily die of starvation.

The closer the footsteps came, the faster Milt's heart pounded till he felt his arteries would burst. He felt a stab of excitement. The normal had come into sight. Milt and his family would feast. He gauged the time and leaped.


Pierre stumbled but kept on running, despite the needles of pain in his ankle. Something was wrong, he kept slipping. When he finally reached the lights of town and knew he was safe, he pulled off his shoe, a gigantic oxford as befitting his fourteen-foot body. On the bottom, squashed against the huge sole, was an animal of some kind. Pierre shook his head in puzzlement. It looked almost like a tiny dog.

—MARSH CASSADY



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SILKY, SLINKY, FABULOUS — TO DIE FOR

By MARK McLAUGHLIN

Illustrated by Heywood

Tawny Nicole, creamy Damon, *café au lait* Giselle; all three had lovely skin and wild, golden hair. All three wore fabulous new outfits of shot-silk, and all three were gazing upon Theophile Comte with sparkling green eyes.

"You are a genius, Theo darling," Nicole said, stroking the sleeve of her bolero jacket. "A mad genius. The Oscar Wilde of fashion."

"Oh, please." Damon sighed with exasperation and rolled his eyes. "He is a modern-day Baudelaire." He patted his scarf into place and sighed again, this time with contentment.

Giselle laughed her tiny, tinkling, descending-tones laugh. "Try Aleister Crowley." A golden bell on her ankle bracelet jangled as she walked to the full-length mirror next to Theophile's work table. Ordinarily, harem pants did nothing for her . . . These, however, were marvelous. Absolutely to die for.

Theophile grinned hugely. Moonlight streamed through the skylight of his loft apartment, illuminating

his bald pate. "You look lovely, my dear ones. Absolutely lovely." He handed each of the models a petite black cup. "Now let us see how my pretty rags work."

The three drank the amber liqueur within the cups. Nicole purred as her jacket merged with her flesh. Wavy golden fur cascaded from her arms, her back. "Haute couterie from Hell," she whispered. "You have outdone yourself, Theo."

Damon licked his lips. "Delicious. A touch of mint." He set down his cup and flexed his long, curved claws.

"Yes, there is mint in the brew," Theophile said. He adjusted his turtleneck to hide his double chin. "And catnip and valerian and satyr's blood."

Giselle dropped to all fours. She noticed an errant curl on her right flank and licked it into place. "However will you change us back?"

The bald man raised an iron-gray eyebrow. "Change you back? Surely not! This is my greatest triumph, my dear ones. You shall stay this way forever . . . and in a moment, I shall join you. But I must confess: you were my guinea pigs, after a fashion."

Nicole looked to Damon, who in turn looked to Giselle.

"Speaking of fashion," Theophile continued, "I certainly like what I see. The season definitely calls for fur. Excuse me while I slip into my own silk suit." He moved toward a large, flat box lying beside the full-length mirror.

Giselle jumped on top of the box; the gold bell

jangled one last time as the ankle bracelet fell from her back paw. She began to growl at the bald man. Damon and Nicole drew closer, claws tapping on the hardwood floor.

"My dear ones!" Theophile bit his thick lower lip. "I gather that the three of you are upset . . . Because you can no longer model? Is that it?"

"Of course not." Damon sighed deeply and rolled his slit-pupiled eyes. "Don't you see? We can't let you have that suit. We simply can't. This sort of look requires—Panache. Style. Flair."

"Too true," Nicole murmured. She tickled Theophile's potbelly with the tip of a claw, drawing blood. Rich, fatty blood.

Giselle's laugh now sounded more like a hiss. "You

may be the designer, old man," she said, "but the catwalk is ours."

Theophile opened his mouth to protest. And at that moment, his dear ones pounced.

—MARK McLAUGHLIN

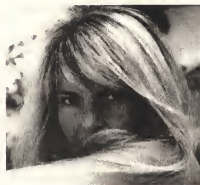
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MAN IN THE MAILBAG

By GORDON R. DICKSON

Illustrated by Doran

The Right Honorable Joshua Guy, Ambassador Plenipotentiary to Dilbia, was smoking tobacco in a pipe. The fumes from it made John Tardy cough and strangle — or, at least, so it seemed.

"Sir?" wheezed John Tardy.

"Sorry," said Joshua, knocking the pipe out in an ashtray where the coals continued to smolder only slightly less villainously than before. "Thought you heard me the first time. I said that naturally as soon as we knew you were being assigned to the job, we let out word that you were deeply attached to the girl."

"To—" John gulped air. Both men were talking Dilbian, to exercise the command of the language John had had hypnoed into him on his way here from the Belt Stars, and the Dilbian nickname for the missing Earthian female sociologist came from his lips automatically — "this Greasy Face?"

"Miss Ty Lamorc," nodded Joshua, smoothly slipping into Basic and then out again. "Greasy Face, if you prefer. By the by, you mustn't go taking all these Dilbian names at face value. The two old gentlemen you're going to meet — Daddy Shaking Knees and Two Answers — aren't what they might sound like. Daddy Shaking Knees got his name from holding up one end of

a timber one day in an emergency — after about forty-five minutes, someone noticed his knees beginning to tremble. And Two Answers is a tribute to the Dilbian who can come up with more than one answer to a problem."

About to ask Joshua about his own Dilbian nickname of Little Bite, John Tardy shifted to safer ground. "What about this Schlaff fellow who—"

"Heiner Schlaff," interrupted Joshua Guy, frowning, "made a mistake. You'd think anyone would know better than to lose his head when a Dilbian picks him up. After the first time one picked up Heinie, he wasn't able to step out onto the street without some Dilbian lifting him up to hear him yell for help. The Squeaking Squirt, they called him — very bad for Earth-Dilbian relations." He looked severely at John. "I don't expect anything like that from you." The ambassador's eye seemed to weigh John's chunky body and red hair.

"No, no," said John hastily.

"Decathlon winner in the Olympics four years back, weren't you?"

"Yes," said John. "But what I really want is to get on an Exploration team to one of the new planets. I'm a fully qualified biochemist and—"

"I read your file. Well," Joshua Guy said, "do a good job here and who knows?" He glanced out the window beside him at the sprawling log buildings of the local Dilbian town of Humrog, framed against the native conifers and the mountain peaks beyond. "But it's your physical condition that'll count. You understand *why* you have to go it alone, don't you?"

"They told me back on Earth. But if you can add anything—"

"Headquarters never understands the fine points of these situations," said Joshua, almost cheerfully. "To put it tersely — we want to make friends with these Dilbians. They're the race nearest to ours in intelligence that we've run across so far. They'd make fine partners. Unfortunately we don't seem to be able to impress them very much."

"Size?" asked John Tardy.

"Well, yes — size is probably the biggest stumbling block. The fact that we're about lap-dog proportions in relation to them. But it shows up even more sharply in a cultural dissimilarity. They don't give a hang for our mechanical gimmicks and they're all for personal honor and a healthy outdoors life." He looked at John. "You'll say, of course, why not a show of force?"

"I should think—" began John.

"But we don't want to fight them — we want to make friends with them. Let me give you an Earth-type analogy. For centuries, humans have been able to more or less tame most of the smaller wild animals. The large ones, however, being unused to knuckling under to anyone—"

Beep! signaled the annunciator on Joshua's desk.

"Ah, they're here now." Joshua Guy rose. "We'll go into the reception room. Now remember that Boy-Is-She-Built is old Shaking Knees' daughter. It was the fact that the Streamside Terror wanted her that caused all this ruckus and ended up with the Terror's kidnapping Ty Lamorc."

He led the way through the door into the next room. John Tardy followed, his head, in spite of the hypno training, still spinning a little with the odd Dilbian names — in particular Boy-Is-She-Built, the Basic translation of which was only a pale shadow of its Dilbian original. While not by any means a shy person, John rather hesitated to look a father in the eye and refer to the female child of his old age as — further reflections were cut short as he entered the room.

"Ah, there, Little Bite!" boomed the larger of the two black-furred monsters awaiting them. The one who spoke stood well over two and a half meters in height — at least eight feet tall. "This the new one? Two Answers and I came right over to meet him. Kind of bright-colored on top, isn't he?"

John Tardy blinked. But Joshua Guy answered equably enough.

"Some of us have that color hair back home," he said. "This is John Tardy — John, meet Shaking Knees. And the quiet one is Two Answers."

"Quiet!" roared the other Dilbian, bursting into gargantuan roars of laughter. "Me quiet! That's good!" He bellowed his merriment.

John stared. In spite of the hypno training, he could not help comparing these two to a couple of very large bears who had stood up on their hind legs and gone on a

diet. They were leaner than bears — though leanness is relative when you weigh upward of a thousand pounds — and longer-legged. Their noses were more pug, their lower jaws more humanlike than ursinoid in the way of chin. But their complete coat of thick black hair and their bearishness of language and actions made the comparison almost inevitable — though in fact their true biological resemblance was closer to the humans themselves.

"Haven't laughed like that since old Souse Nose fell in the beer vat!" snorted Two Answers, gradually getting himself under control. "All right, Bright Top, what've you got to say for yourself? Think you can take the Streamside Terror with one hand tied behind your back?"

"I'm here," said John Tardy, "to bring back — er — Greasy Face, and—"

"Streamside won't just hand her over. Will he, Knees?" Two Answers jogged his companion with a massively humorous elbow.

"Not that boy!" Shaking Knees shook his head. "Little Bite, I ought never have let you talk me out of a son-in-law like that. Tough? Rough? Tricky? My little girl'd do all right with a buck like that."

"I merely," demurred Joshua, "suggested you make them wait a bit. Boy-Is-She-Built is still rather young—"

"And, boy, is she built!" said Shaking Knees in a tone of fond, fatherly pride. "Still, it's hard to see how she could do much better." He peered suddenly at Joshua. "You wouldn't have something hidden between your paws on this?"

Joshua Guy spread his hands in a wounded manner. "Would I risk one of my own people? Maybe two? All to start something that would make the Terror mad enough to steal Greasy to pay me back?"

"Guess not," admitted Shaking Knees. "But you Shorties are shrewd little characters." His words rang with honest admiration.

"Thanks. The same to you," said Joshua. "Now about the Terror—"

"He headed west through the Cold Mountains," replied Two Answers. "He was spotted yesterday a half-day's hike north, pointed toward Sour Ford and the Hollows. He probably nighted at Brittle Rock Inn there."

"Good," said Joshua. "We'll have to find a guide for my friend here."

"Guide? Ho!" chortled Shaking Knees. "Wait'll you see what we got for you." He shouldered past Two Answers, opened the door and bellowed, "Bluffer! Come on in!"

There was a moment's pause, and then a Dilbian even leaner and taller than Shaking Knees shoved his way into the room, which, with this new Dilbian addition, became decidedly crowded.

"There you are," said Shaking Knees, waving a prideful paw. "What more could you want? Walk all day, climb all night, and start out fresh next morning after breakfast. Little Bite, meet the Hill Bluffer!"

"That's me!" boomed the newcomer, rattling the walls. "Anything on two feet walk away from me? Not over solid ground or living rock! When I look at a hill, it knows it's beat, and it lays out flat for my trampling feet!"

"Very good," said Joshua dryly. "But I don't know about my friend here keeping up if you can travel like that."

"Keep up? Hah!" guffawed Shaking Knees. "No, no, Little Bite — don't you recognize the Bluffer here? He's the postman. We're going to mail this half-pint friend of yours to the Terror. Only way. Cost you five kilos of nails."

"Nobody stops the mail," put in the Hill Bluffer.

"Hmm," said Joshua. He glanced at John Tardy. "Not a bad suggestion. The only thing is how you plan to carry him —"

"Who? Him?" boomed the Bluffer, focusing on John. "Why, I'll handle him like he was a week-old pup. I'll wrap him in some real soft straw and tuck him in the bottom of my mailbag and—"

"Hold it," interrupted Joshua. "That's just what I was afraid of. If you're going to carry him, you'll have to do it humanely."

"I won't wear it!" the Hill Bluffer was still roaring, two hours later. The cause of his upset, a system of straps and pads arranged into a rough saddlebag that would ride between his shoulders and bear John, lay on the crushed rock of Humrog's main street. A few Dilbian bystanders had gathered to watch and their bass-voiced comments were not of the sort to bring the Hill Bluffer to a more reasonable frame of mind.

"Listen, you tad!" Shaking Knees was beginning to get a little hot under the neck-fur himself. "This is your mother's uncle's first cousin speaking. You want me to speak to the great-grandfathers of your clan—"

"Arright — arright — arright!" snarled the Hill Bluffer. "Buckle me up in the obscenity thing!"

"That's better!" growled Shaking Knees, simmering down as John Tardy and Joshua Guy went to work to put the saddle on. "Not that I blame you, but—"

"Don't feel so bad at that," said the Hill Bluffer sulking, wriggling his shoulders under the straps in experimental fashion.

"You'll find it," grunted Joshua, tugging on a strap, "easier to carry than your regular bag."

"That's not the point," groused the Hill Bluffer. "A postman's got dignity. He just don't wear—" He exploded suddenly at a snickering onlooker. "What's so funny, you? Want to make something out of it? Just say the—"

"I'll take care of him!" roared Shaking Knees, rolling forward. "What's wrong with you, Split Nose?"

The Dilbian addressed as Split Nose swallowed his grin rather hastily as the Humrog village chief took a hand in the conversation.

"Just passing by," he growled defensively, backing

out of the crowd.

"Well, just pass on, friend, pass on!" boomed Shaking Knees. He was rewarded by a hearty laugh from the crowd, and Split Nose rolled off down the street with every indication his hairy ears were burning.

John had taken advantage of this little by-play to mount into the saddlebag. The Hill Bluffer grunted in surprise and looked back at him.

"You're light enough," he said. "How is it? All right back there?"

"Feels fine," said John, unsuspecting.

"Then so long, everybody!" boomed the Hill Bluffer, and, without further warning, barreled off down the main street in the direction of the North Trail, the Cold Mountains and the elusive but dangerous Streamside Terror.

Had it not been for the hypno training, John Tardy would not have been able to recognize this fast and unexpected start for the Dilbian trick it was. He realized instantly, however, that the Hill Bluffer, having lost his enthusiasm for the job at first sight of the harness which was to carry John, was attempting a little strategy to get out of it. Outright refusal to carry John was out of the question, but if John should object to the unceremoniousness of his departure, the Bluffer would be perfectly justified — by Dilbian standards — if he threw up his hands and refused to deliver a piece of mail that insisted on imposing conditions on him. John shut his mouth and hung on.

All the same, it was awkward. John had intended to work out a plan of action with Joshua Guy before he left. Well, there was always the wrist-phone. He would call Joshua at the first convenient opportunity.

Meanwhile, it was developing that the Hill Bluffer had not exaggerated his ability to cover ground. One moment they were on the main street of Humrog, and the next upon a mountain trail, green pinelike branches whipping by as John Tardy plunged and swayed to the Hill Bluffer's motion like a man on the back of an elephant. It was no time for abstract thought. John clung to the straps before him, meditating rather bitterly on that natural talent of his for athletics which had got him into this, when by all rights he should be on an exploration team on one of the frontier planets right now. He was perfectly qualified, but just because of that decathlon win . . .

He continued to nurse his grievances for something better than an hour, when he was suddenly interrupted by the Hill Bluffer's grunting and slowing down. Peering forward over the postman's shoulder, John discovered another Dilbian who had just stepped out of the woods before them. The newcomer was on the shaggy side. He carried an enormous triangular-headed axe and had some native herbivore roughly the size and shape of a musk-ox slung casually over one shoulder.

"Hello, woodsman," said the Hill Bluffer, halting.

"Hello, postman." The other displayed a gap-toothed

array of fangs in a grin. "Got some mail for me?"

"You!" the Hill Bluffer snorted.

"Not so funny. I could get mail," growled the other. He peered around at John. "So that's the Half Pint Posted."

"Oh?" said the Hill Bluffer. "Who told you?"

"The Cobby Queen, that's who!" retorted the other, curling the right side of his upper lip in the native equivalent of a wink. John Tardy, recalling the Cobbles were the Dilbian equivalent of fairies, brownies, or what-have-you, peered at the woodsman to see if he was serious. John decided he wasn't. Which still left the problem of how he had recognized John.

Remembering the best Dilbian manners were made of sheer brass, John Tardy horned in on the conversation. "Who're you?" he demanded of the woodsman.

"So it talks, does it?" The woodsman grinned. "They call me Tree Weeper, Half Pint. Because I chop them down, you see."

"Who told you about me?"

"Oh, that'd be telling," grinned Tree Weeper. "Say, you know why they call him the Streamside Terror, Half Pint? It's on account of he likes to fight alongside a stream, pull the other feller in and drown him."

"I know," said John shortly.

"Do you now?" said the other. "Well, it ought to be something to watch. Good going to you, Half Pint, and you too, postman. Me for home."

He turned away into the brush alongside the trail and it swallowed him up. The Hill Bluffer took up his route again without a word.

"Friend of yours?" inquired John, when it became apparent the Hill Bluffer was not going to comment on the meeting.

"Friend?" the Hill Bluffer snorted angrily. "I'm a public official!"

"I just thought—" said John. "He seemed to know things."

"That hill hopper! Somebody ahead of us told him!" growled the Bluffer. But he fell unaccountably silent after that and said no more for the next three hours, until — the two of them having left Humrog a couple of hours past noon — they pulled up in the waning sunlight before the roadside inn at Brittle Rock, where they would spend the night.

The first thing John Tardy did, after working some life back into his legs, was to stroll off to the limits of the narrow, rocky ledge on which the Inn stood — Brittle Rock was hardly more than a wide spot in the narrow mountain gorge up which their road ran — and put in a call to Joshua Guy with the phone on his wrist. As soon as Joshua got on the beam, John relievedly explained the reason behind his call. It did not go over, apparently, very well.

"Instructions?" floated the faintly astonished voice of the ambassador out of the receiver. "What instructions?"

"The ones you were going to give me. Before I took off so suddenly—"

"But there's absolutely nothing I can tell you," interrupted Joshua. "You've had your hypno training. It's up to you. Find the Terror and get the girl back. You'll have to figure out your own means, my dear fellow."

"But—" John stopped, staring helpless at the phone.

"Well, good luck, then. Call me tomorrow. Call me anytime."

"Thanks," said John.

"Not at all. Luck. Good-by."

"Good-by."

John Tardy clicked off the phone and walked somberly back to the Inn. Inside its big front door, he found a wide common room filled with tables and benches. The Hill Bluffer, to the amusement of a host of other travelers, was arguing with a female Dilbian wearing an apron.

"How the unmentionable should I know what to feed him?" the Hill Bluffer was bellowing. "Give him some meat, some beer — anything!"

"But you haven't had the children dragging in pets like I have. Feed one the wrong thing and it dies. And then they cry their little hearts—"

"Talking about me?" John Tardy broke in.

"Oh!" gasped the female, glancing down and retreating half a step. "It talks!"

"Didn't I say he did?" demanded the Bluffer. "Half Pint, what kind of stuff do you eat?"

John fingered the four-inch tubes of food concentrate at his waist. Dilbian food would not poison him, though he could expect little nourishment from it, and a fair chance of an allergic reaction from certain fruits and vegetables. Bulk was all he needed to supplement the concentrates.

"Just give me a little beer," he said.

The room buzzed approval. This little critter, they seemed to feel, could not be too alien if he liked to drink. The female brought him a wastebasket-sized wooden mug that had no handles and smelled like the most decayed of back-log breweries. John took a cautious sip and held the bitter, sour, flat-tasting liquid in his mouth for an indecisive moment.

He swallowed manfully. The assembled company gave vent to rough-voiced approval, then abruptly turned their attention elsewhere. Looking around, he saw that the Hill Bluffer had gone off somewhere. John climbed up on a nearby bench and got to work on his food concentrates.

After finishing these, he continued to sit where he was for the better part of an hour, but the Hill Bluffer did not return. Struck by a sudden thought, John Tardy climbed down and went back toward the kitchen of the Inn. Pushing his way through a hide curtain, he found himself in it — a long room with a stone fire-trough down the center, carcasses hanging from overhead

beams, and a dozen or so Dilbians of both sexes equally immersed in argument and the preparation of food and drink. Among them was the female who had brought John the beer.

He stepped into her path as she headed for the front room with a double handful of full mugs.

"Eeeek!" she exclaimed, or the Dilbian equivalent, stopping so hastily she spilled some of the beer. "There's a good little Shorty," she said in a quavering, coaxing tone. "Good Shorty. Go back now."

"Was the Terror really here last night?" John asked.

"He stopped to pick up some meat and beer, but I didn't see him," she said. "I've no time for hill-and-alley brawlers. Now shoo!"

John Tardy shooed.

As he was heading back to his bench, however, he felt himself scooped up from behind. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw he was being carried by a large male Dilbian with a pouch hanging from one shoulder. This individual carried him to a table where three other Dilbians sat and dropped him on it. John Tardy instinctively got to his feet.

"There he be," said the one who had picked him up. "A genuine Shorty."

"Give him some beer," suggested one with a scar on his face, who was seated at the table.

They did. John prudently drank some.

"Don't hold much," commented one of the others at the table, examining the mug John had set down after what had been actually a very healthy draft for a human. "I wonder if he—"

"Couldn't. Not at that size," replied the one with the pouch. "He's chasing that female Shorty, though. You reckon—"

Scarface regretted that they did not have the Shorty female there at the moment. Her presence, in his opinion, would have provided the opportunity for interesting and educative experimentation.

"Go to hell!" said John in Basic. He then made the most forceful translation he could manage in Dilbian.

"Tough character!" said the pouched one, and they all laughed. "Better not get tough with me, though."

He made a few humorous swipes at John's red head that would have split it on contact. They laughed again.

"I wonder," said Scarface, "can he do tricks?"

"Sure," John answered promptly. He hefted his still-full mug of beer. "Watch. I take a firm grip, rock back, and—!" He spun suddenly on one heel, sloshing a wave of beer into their staring faces. Then he was off the table and dodging among Dilbian and table legs toward the front entrance. The rest of the guests, roaring with laughter, made no attempt to halt him. He ducked into the outer darkness.

Fumbling in the gloom, he made his way around the side of the Inn and dropped down on a broken keg he found there. He was just making up his mind to stay there until the Hill Bluffer came and found him, when

the back kitchen door opened and closed very softly, off to his left.

He slipped off the keg into deeper shadow. He had caught just a glimpse out of the corner of his eye, but he had received the impression of a Dilbian female in the doorway. There was no sound now.

He began to creep backward. Dilbian's one moon was not showing over these latitudes at this season of the year, and the starlight gave only a faint illumination. He stumbled suddenly over the edge of an unseen slope and froze, remembering the cliff edge overhanging the gorge below.

A faint reek of the Dilbian odor came to his nostrils — and a sound of sniffing. Dilbians were no better than humans when it came to a sense of smell, but each had a perceptible odor to the nostrils of the other — an odor partly dependent on diet, partly on a differing physiological makeup. The odor John Tardy smelled was part-piny, part-musk.

The sniffing ceased. John held his breath, waiting for it to start again. The pressure built up in his chest, and finally he was forced to exhale. He turned his head slowly from side to side.

Silence.

Only the inner creak of his tense neck muscles turning. There! Was that something? John began to creep back along the edge beside him.

There was a sudden rush, a rearing up of some huge dark shape in the darkness before him. He dodged, felt himself slipping on the edge, and something smashed like a falling wall against the side of his head, and he went whirling down and away into star-shot darkness.

He opened his eyes to bright sunlight.

The sun, just above the mountain peaks, was shining right in his eyes. He blinked and started to roll over, out of its glare, into—

—And grabbed in a sudden cold sweat for the stubby trunk of a dwarf tree growing right out of the cliffside.

For a second then, he hung there, sweating and looking down. He lay on a narrow ledge and the gorge was deep below. How deep, he did not stop to figure. It was deep enough.

He twisted around and looked up the distance of a couple of meters to the ledge on which the Inn was built. It was not far. He could climb it. After a while, with his heart in his throat, John Tardy did.

When he came back around the front of the Inn, in the morning sunlight, it was to find the Bluffer orating at a sort of open-air meeting, with the four who had harried John standing handdog between two axemen and before an elderly Dilbian judgelike on a bench.

"—the mail!" the Hill Bluffer was roaring. "The mail is sacred! Anyone daring to lay fist upon the mail in transit—"

John, tottering forward, put an end to the trial in progress.

Later on, after washing his slight scalp-wound and

having taken on some more food concentrates and flat beer for breakfast, John Tardy climbed back up on the Bluffer's back and they were under way once more. Their route today led from Brittle Rock through the mountains to Sour Ford and the Hollows. The Hollows, John had learned, was clan-country for the Terror, and their hope was to catch him before he reached it. The trail now led across swinging rope suspension bridges and along narrow cuts in the rock — all of which the Hill Bluffer took not only with the ease of one well accustomed to them, but with the abstraction of one lost in deep thought.

"Hey!" said John, at last.

"Huh? What?" grunted the Hill Bluffer, coming to suddenly.

"Tell me something," said John, reaching out for anything to keep his carrier awake. "How'd the ambassador get the name Little Bite?"

"You don't know that?" exclaimed the Hill Bluffer.

"I thought you Shorties all knew. Well, it was old Hammertoes down at Humrog."

The Bluffer chuckled. "Got drunk and all worked up about Shorties. 'Gimme the good old days,' he said, and went down to just make an example of Little Bite — Shorty One, we called him then. He pushes the door open far as it'll go, but Little Bite's got it fixed to only open part way. So there's Hammertoes, with only one arm through the door, feeling around and hollering, 'All right, Shorty! You can't get away! I'll get you—' when Little Bite picks up something sharp and cuts him a couple times across the knuckles. Old Hammertoes yells bloody murder and yanks his hand back. Slam goes the door."

The Hill Bluffer chortled to himself. "Then old Hammertoes comes back uptown, sucking his knuckles. 'What happened?' says everybody. 'Nothing,' says Hammertoes. 'Something must've happened — look at your hand,' everybody says. 'I tell you nothing happened!' yells Hammertoes. 'He wouldn't let me in where I could grab hold of him, so I come away. And as for my hand, that's got nothing to do with it. He didn't hurt my hand hardly at all. He just give it a little bite!'"

The Hill Bluffer's laughter rolled like thunder between the mountain walls. "Old Hammertoes never did live that down. Every time since, whenever he goes to give somebody a hard time, they all tell him, 'Look out, Hammertoes, or I'm liable to give you a little bite!'"

John Tardy found himself laughing. Possibly it was the time and place of the telling, possibly the story, but he could see the situation in his mind's eye and it was funny.

"You know," said the Bluffer over one furry shoulder when John stopped laughing, "you're not bad for a Shorty." He fell silent, appeared to wrestle with himself for a moment, then came to a stop and sat down in a convenient wide spot on the trail.

"Get off," he said. "Come around where I can talk to

you."

John complied. He found himself facing the seated Dilbian, their heads about on a level. Behind the large, black-furred skull, a few white clouds floated in the high blue sky.

"You know," the Bluffer said, "the Streamside Terror's mug's been spilled."

"Spilled?" echoed John — then remembered this as a Dilbian phrase expressing loss of honor. "By me? He's never even seen me."

"By Little Bite," the Bluffer said. "But Little Bite's a Guest in Humrog and the North Country. The Terror couldn't call him to account personally for speaking against Shaking Knees giving the Terror Boy-Is-She-Built. He had to do something, though, so he took Greasy Face."

"Oh," said John.

"So you got to fight the Terror if you want Greasy back."

"Fight?" John blurted.

"Man's got his pride," said the Bluffer. "That's why I can't figure you out. I mean you aren't bad for a Shorty. You got guts — like with those drunks last night. But you fighting the Terror — I mean *hell!*" said the Bluffer, in deeply moved tones.

Silently, John Tardy found himself in full agreement with the postman.

"So what're you going to do when you meet Streamside?"

"Well," said John, rather inadequately, "I don't exactly know—"

"Well," growled the Bluffer in his turn, "not my problem. Get on." John went around behind his furry back. "Oh, by the way, know who it was tried to pitch you over the cliff?"

"Who?" asked John.

"The Cobby Queen — Boy-Is-She-Built!" translated the Bluffer as John looked blank. "She heard about you and got ahead of us somehow . . ." The Bluffer's voice trailed off into a mutter. "If they're thinking of monkeying with the mail . . ."

John paid no attention. He had his own fish to fry, and very fishy indeed they smelled just at the moment. Swaying on top of the enormous back as they took off again, he found himself scowling over the situation. Headquarters had said nothing about his being expected to fight some monstrous free-style scrapper of an alien race — a sort of gargantuan Billy the Kid with a number of kills to his credit. Joshua Guy had not mentioned it. Just what was going on here, anyway?

Abruptly casting aside the security regulation that recommended a "discreet" use of the instrument, John lifted the wrist that bore his wrist-phon to his lips.

"Josh—" he began, and suddenly checked. A fine trickle of sweat ran coldly down his spine.

The phone was gone.

He had the rest of the morning to ponder this new development in the situation, and a good portion of the afternoon. He might have continued indefinitely if it had not been for a sudden interruption in their journey.

They had crossed a number of spidery suspension bridges during the course of the day, and now they had come to another one, somewhat longer than any met so far. If this had been the only difference, John might have been left to his thoughts. But this bridge was different.

Somebody had fixed it so they couldn't get across.

It happened that their end of the bridge had its anchors sunk in a rock face a little back and some seven or eight meters above their heads. All that had been done, simply enough, was to tighten the two main support cables at the far end. The sag of the span had straightened out, lifting the near end up above them, out of reach.

The Hill Bluffer bellowed obscenely across the gap. There was no response from the windlass on the far side, or the small hut beyond.

"What's happened?" John Tardy asked.

"I don't know," said the Bluffer, suddenly thoughtful. "It isn't supposed to be rucked up except at night, to keep people from sneaking over not paying toll."

He reached as high as he could, but his fingertips fell far short.

"Lift me up," suggested John.

They tried it, but even upheld by the ankles, at the full stretch of the Bluffer's arms, John was rewarded only by a throat-squeezing view of the Knobby River below.

"It'll take five days to go around by Slide Pass," growled the Bluffer, putting John down.

John went over to examine the rock face. What he discovered about it did not make him happy, though perhaps it should have. It was climbable. Heart tucked in throat, he began to go up it.

"Hey! Where're you going?" bellowed the Hill Bluffer.

John did not answer. He needed his breath; anyway, his destination was obvious. The climb up the rock was not bad for someone who had had some mountain experience, but a reaction set in when he wrapped his arms around the rough six-inch cable. He inched his way upward and got on top, both arms and both legs wrapped around the cable, and began a worm-creep toward the bridge end, floating on nothingness at a rather remarkable distance — seen from this angle — ahead of him.

It occurred to him, after he had slowly covered about a third of the cable-distance in this fashion, that a real hero in a place like this should stand up and tightrope walk to the bridge proper. This, in addition to impressing the Bluffer, would shorten the suspense considerably. John Tardy concluded he must be a conservative and went on crawling.

Eventually he reached the bridge, crawled out on it

and lay panting for a while, then got up and crossed the gorge. At the far end, he knocked loose the lock on the windlass with a heavy rock, and the bridge banged down into position, raising a cloud of dust.

Through this same cloud of dust, the Hill Bluffer was shortly to be seen advancing with a look of grim purpose. He stalked past John and entered the hut — from which subsequently erupted thunderous crashes, thuds and roars.

John Tardy looked about for a place of safety. He had never seen two Dilbians fight, but it was only too apparent now what was going on inside.

He was still looking around, however, when the sound ceased abruptly and the Hill Bluffer emerged, dabbing at a torn ear.

"Old slaver-tongue," he growled. "*She* got at him."

"Who?" asked John.

"Boy Is-She-Built. Well, mount up, Half Pint. Oh, by the way, that was pretty good."

"Good? What was?"

"Climbing across the bridge that way. Took guts. Well, let's go."

John climbed back up into his saddlebag and thought heavily.

"You didn't kill him?" he asked, as they started out once more.

"Who? Old Winch Rope? Just knocked a little sense into him. Hell, there's got to be somebody work the bridge. Hang on now. It's all downhill from here and it'll be twilight before we hit the Ford."

It was indeed twilight before they reached their stopping place at Sour Ford. John Tardy, who had been dozing, awoke with a jerk and sat up in his saddle, blinking.

In the fading light, they stood in a large, grassy clearing semi-circled by forest. Directly before them was a long low log building, and behind it a smooth-flowing river with its farther shore shrouded in tree shadow and the approaching dusk.

"Get down," said the Bluffer.

Stiffly, John Tardy descended, stamped about to restore his circulation, and followed the Bluffer's huge bulk through the hide-curtain of the doorway to the building's oil-lampit interior.

John discovered a large room like that at the Brittle Rock Inn — but one that was cleaner, airier, and filled with travelers a good deal less noisy and drunken. Gazing around for the explanation behind this difference, John caught sight of a truly enormous Dilbian, grizzled with age and heavy with fat, seated like a patriarch in a huge chair behind a table at the room's far end.

John and the Bluffer found a table and set about eating. But as soon as they were through, the postman led John up to the patriarch.

"One Man," said the Bluffer in a respectful voice, "this here's the Half Pint Posted."

John Tardy blinked. Up close, One Man had turned

out to be even more awe-inspiring than he had seemed from a distance. He overflowed the carved chair he sat in, and the graying fur on top of his head all but brushed against a polished staff of hardwood laid crosswise on pegs driven into the wall two meters above the floor. His massive forearms and great pawlike hands were laid out on the table before him like swollen clubs of bone and muscle. But his face was almost biblically serene.

"Sit down," he rumbled in a voice so deep it sounded like a great drum sounding far off somewhere in a woods. "I've wanted to see a Shorty. You're my Guest, Half Pint, for as long as you wish. Anyone tell you about me?"

"I'm sorry—" began John.

"Never mind." The enormous head nodded mildly. "They call me One Man, Half Pint, because I once held blood feud all by myself — being an orphan — with a whole clan. And won." He looked calmly at John. "What you might call an impossible undertaking."

"Some of them caught him on a trail once," put in the Hill Bluffer. "He killed all three."

"That was possible," murmured One Man. His eyes were still on John. "Tell me, Half Pint, what are you Shorties doing here, anyhow?"

"Well—" John blinked. "I'm looking for Greasy Face—"

"I mean the entire lot of you," One Man said. "There must be some plan behind it. Nobody asked you all here, you know."

"Well—" said John again, rather lamely, and proceeded to try an explanation. It did not seem to go over very well, a technological civilization being hard to picture with the Dilbian vocabulary.

One Man nodded when John Tardy was through. "I see. If that's the case, what makes you think we ought to like you Shorties?"

"Ought to?" said John, jolted into a reactive answer, for he did not have red hair for nothing. "You don't ought to! It's up to you."

One Man nodded. "Pass me my stick," he said.

One of the Dilbians standing around took down the staff from its pegs and passed it to him. He laid it on the table before him — a young post ten centimeters in thickness — grasping it with fists held over two meters apart.

"No one's ever been able to do this but me," he said.

Without lifting his fists from contact with the table, he rotated them to the outside. The staff sprang upward in the center like a bow, and snapped.

"Souvenir for you," said One Man, handing the pieces to John. "Good night."

He closed his eyes and sat as if dozing. The Bluffer tapped John on a shoulder and led him away, off to their sleeping quarters.

Once in the Inn dormitory, however, John found himself totally unable to sleep. He had passed from utter bone-weariness into a sort of feverish wide-awakeness,

through which the little episode with One Man buzzed and circled like a persistently annoying fly.

What had been the point of all that talk and wood-breaking?

Suddenly and quietly, John sat up. Beside him, on his heap of soft branches, the Bluffer slept without stirring, as did the rest of the dormitory inhabitants. A single lamp burned high above, hanging from the roofreef. By its light, John got out and examined the broken pieces of wood. There was a little node or knot visible just at the point of breakage. A small thing, but—

John frowned. He seemed surrounded by mysteries. The more he thought of it, the more certain he was that One Man had been attempting to convey some message to him. What was it? For that matter, what was going on between humans and Dilbians, and what had his mission to rescue Greasy Face to do with the business of persuading the recalcitrant Dilbians into a partnership? If that was indeed the aim, as Joshua Guy had said.

John swung out of the pile of boughs and to his feet. One Man, he decided, owed him a few more — and plainer — answers.

He went softly down the length of the dormitory and through the door into the common room of the Inn.

There were few Dilbians about — they went early to bed. And One Man was also nowhere to be seen. He had not come into the dormitory, John knew. So either he had separate quarters, or else he had stepped outside for some reason . . .

John Tardy crossed the room and slipped out through the Inn entrance. He paused to accustom his eyes to the darkness and moved off from the building to get away from the window light. Slowly the night took shape around him, the wide face of the river running silver-dark in the faint light of the stars, and the clearing pooled in gloom.

He circled cautiously around the Inn to its back. Unlike Brittle Rock, the back yard here was clear of rubbish, sloping gradually to the river. It was given over to smaller huts and outbuildings. Among these the darkness was more profound and he felt his way cautiously.

Groping about in this fashion, quietly, but with some small, unavoidable noise, he saw a thin blade of yellow light. It cut through the parting of two leather curtains in the window of a hut close by him. He stepped eagerly toward it, about to peer through the crack, when, from deep wall shadow, a hand reached out and took his arm.

"Do you want to get yourself killed?" hissed a voice.

And, of course, it was human. And, of course, it spoke in Basic.

Whoever had hold of him drew him deeper into the shadow and away from the building where they stood. They came to another hut whose door stood ajar on an interior blackness, and John was led into this darkness. The hand let go of his arm. The door closed softly. There was a scratch, a sputter, and an animal-oil lamp burst

into light within the place.

John squinted against the sudden illumination. When he could see again, he found himself looking into the face of one of the best-looking young women he had ever seen.

She was a good fifteen centimeters shorter than he, but at first glance looked taller by reason of her slim outline in the tailored coveralls she wore. To John Tardy, after two days of Dilbians, she looked tiny — fragile. Her chestnut hair swept back in two wide wings on each side of her head. Her eyes were green above sharply marked cheekbones that gave her face a sculptured look. Her nose was thin, her lips firm rather than full, and her small chin was determined.

John blinked. "Who—?"

"I'm Ty Lamorc," she whispered fiercely. "Keep your voice down!"

"Ty Lamorc? You?"

"Yes, yes!" she said impatiently. "Now—"

"Are y-you sure?" stammered John. "I mean—"

"Who were you expecting to run into way out here in — oh, I see!" She glared at him. "It's that Greasy Face name the Dilbians gave me. You were expecting some horror."

"Certainly not," said John stoutly.

"Well, for your information, they just happened to see me putting on makeup one day. That's where the name came from."

"Well, naturally. I didn't think it was because—"

"I'll bet! Anyway, never mind that now. The point is, what are you doing out here? Do you want to get knocked on the head?"

"Who'd knock—" John Tardy stiffened. "The Terror's here!"

"No, no!" She sounded annoyed. "Boy Is-She-Built is."

"Oh." John frowned. "You know, I still don't get it — her angle on all this, I mean."

"She loves him, of course," said Ty Lamorc. "Actually, they make an ideal couple, by Dilbian standards. Now let's get you back to the Inn before she catches you. She won't follow you in there. You're a Guest."

"Now wait—" John took a deep breath. "This is silly. I came out here to find you. I've found you. Let's head back right now. Not to Humrog—"

"You don't," interrupted Ty with feeling, "understand a blasted thing about these people, Half Pint — I mean, Tardy."

"John."

"John, you don't understand the situation. The Streamside Terror left me here with Boy-Is-She-Built because I was slowing him down. That Hill Bluffer of yours is too fast for him, and he wanted to be sure to be in his own clan-country before you caught up with him, in case there would be—" her voice faltered a little — "repercussions to what happens when you meet. It's all a matter of honor, and that's the point. *You're a piece of*

mail, John. Don't you understand? The Hill Bluffer's honor is involved, too."

"Oh," said John. He was silent for a while. "You mean he'd insist on delivering me?"

"What do you think?"

"I see." John was silent again. "Well, to blazes with it," he said at last. "Maybe we can make it across a bridge and cut the ropes and get away from it all. We can't leave you here."

Ty Lamorc did not reply at once. When she did, it was with a pat on his arm.

"You're nice," she said softly. "I'll remember that. Now get back to the Inn." And then she had blown out the lamp and he could hear her go.

Next morning, One Man was still nowhere to be seen. Nor, in the half hour that elapsed before they got going, did John Tardy catch any glimpse of Ty, or a female Dilbian who might be Boy-Is-She-Built. He mounted into the Hill Bluffer's mailbag with his mind still engrossed by the happenings of the night before, and it continued to be engrossed as they began their third day of journey.

They were descending now into a country of lower altitudes, though they were still in hill country. The ground was more gently hollowed and crested, and several new varieties of trees appeared.

But John had no time to consider this. He rode through the cool hours of the morning and into noon's heat still trying to find a common solution to the riddles that occupied his mind — about One Man, about the abduction of Ty Lamorc, and about his own peculiar lack of briefing.

"Tell me," said John finally to the Hill Bluffer, "is it a fact no other Dilbian could break that stick of One Man's that same way?"

"Nobody ever can," replied the Bluffer, as they rounded a small hill and plunged through a thin belt of trees. "Nobody ever will."

"Well, you know," said John, "back where I come from, we have a trick with something called a phone director—"

He stopped. For the Hill Bluffer himself had stopped, with a jolt that almost pitched John from the mailbag. John sat up, looked around the Dilbian's head — and stared.

They had passed through the woods. They had emerged into a small valley in which a cluster of buildings stood in the brown color of their peeled and weathered logs, haphazardly about a stream that ran the valley's length. Beyond these houses there was a sort of natural amphitheater made by a curved indentation of the far rock wall of the valley. Past this the path went when it emerged from between the buildings and plunged into the trees again.

However, none of this claimed John's attention after the first second. He blinked, instead, at a living wall of five large Dilbians with axes.

"Who do you think you're stopping?" bellowed the Hill Bluffer.

"Clan Hollow's in full meeting," responded the central axeman. "The Great-Grandfathers want to see you both. You come with us."

The axemen formed around the Bluffer and John. They led off down and through the village and beyond to the amphitheater that was swarming with Dilbians of all ages. Several hundred of them were there, and more accumulating, below a ledge of rock where six ancient Dilbians sat.

"This is the mail!" stormed the Hill Bluffer as soon as they were close. "Listen, you Clan Hollows—"

"Be quiet, postman!" snapped the old Dilbian at the extreme right of the line as it faced John and the Bluffer. "Your honor will be guarded. Call the meeting."

"Great-Grandfathers of Clan Hollows, sitting in judgment upon a point of honor!" chanted a young Dilbian standing just below the ledge. He repeated the cry six times.

There was a stir in the crowd. Looking around, John saw Ty Lamore. With her was a plump young female that was most likely Boy-Is-She-Built. Boy-Is-She-Built was currently engaged in herding Ty to the foot of the ledge. She accomplished this and immediately began talking.

"I'm Boy-Is-She-Built," she announced.

"We know you," said the Great-Grandfather on the right end.

"I'm speaking here for the Streamside Terror, who's waiting over at Glenn Hollow for the Shorty known as the Half Pint Posted. That Shorty over there. His mug has been spilled — the Terror's, I mean. This Shorty belongs to him — the male over there, I mean. Not that this female Shorty here with me doesn't belong to him, too. He took her fair and square, and it serves those Shorties right. After all, nobody has more honor than the Terror —"

"That's enough," said the judge. "We will decide—"

"I should think you wouldn't even have to call a meeting over it. After all, it's perfectly plain—"

"I said *that's enough!* Be quiet, female!" roared the end judge.

"Well?" interjected one of the other judges testily. "We've heard the arguments. The Shorties are both here. What's left to say?"

"Can I speak?" boomed a new voice, and the crowd parted to let One Man come up before the ledge of rock. The Great-Grandfathers thawed visibly as only great men can in the company of their peers.

"One Man is always welcome to speak," piped an ancient who had not spoken before, and whose voice, with age, had risen almost to the pitch of a human baritone.

"Thank you," said One Man. He raised his head and his voice rose with it, carrying easily out over the assembled Dilbians. "Just think this over. That's what

I've got to say. Think deep about it — because it may be Clan Hollows' decision here is going to be binding on just about everybody — us and Shorties alike."

He waved to the judges and went back into the crowd.

"Thanks, One Man," said the right-end judge. "Now, having heard from everybody important who had something to say, here's our opinion. This is a matter concerning the honor of the Streamside Terror—"

"How about me?" roared the Hill Bluffer. "The mail must —"

"Hold your jaw about the mail!" snapped the right-end judge. "As I was saying, Terror's mug was spilled by the Guest in Humrog. Quite properly, the Terror then spilled the mug of the Guest by stealing off one of the Guest's household. This by itself is a dispute between individuals not touching Clan Hollows. But now here comes along a Shorty who wants to fight Terror for the stolen Shorty. And the question is, can Clan Hollows honorably allow the Terror to do so?"

He paused for a moment, as if to let the point sink in on the crowd.

"For us to do this in honor," he continued, "the combat mentioned must be a matter of honor. And this point arises — is honor possible between a man and a Shorty? We Great-Grandfathers have sat up a full night finding an answer, and to do so we have had to ask ourselves, 'What is a Shorty?' That is, is it the same thing as us, a being capable of having honor and suffering its loss?"

He paused again. The crowd muttered its interest.

"A knotty question," said the spokesman, with a touch of complacency in his voice. "But your Great-Grandfathers have settled it."

The crowd murmured this time in admiration.

"What makes honor?" demanded the spokesman rhetorically. "Honor is a matter of rights — rights violated and rights protected. Have the Shorties among us had any rights? Guest-rights, only. Failing Guest-rights, can one imagine a Shorty defending and maintaining its rights in our world?"

A chortle broke out in the crowd and spread through its listening ranks at the picture conjured up.

"Silence!" snapped another of the judges. "This is not a house-raising."

The crowd went silent.

"Your display of bad manners," said the right-end judge severely, "has pointed up the same conclusion we came to — by orderly process of discussion. It is ridiculous to suppose a Shorty existing as an honor-bound equal in our world. Accordingly, the rules of honor are not binding. Both Shorties here will be returned unharmed to the Guest in Humrog. The Terror has lost no honor. The matter is closed."

He stood up. So did the other five Great-Grandfathers.

"This meeting," he said, "is ended."

"Not yet it isn't!" bellowed the Hill Bluffer.

He plunged forward to the edge of the rock bench, hauling John Tardy along by the slack in John's jacket.

"What do you all know about Shorties?" he demanded. "I've seen this one in action. When a bunch of drunks at Brittle Rock tried to make him do tricks like a performing animal, he fooled them all and got away. How's that for defending his honor? On our way here, the Knobby Gorge Bridge was cranked up out of our reach. He risked his neck climbing up to get it down again, so's not to be slowed in getting his paws on the Terror. How's that for a willingness to defend his rights? I say this Shorty here's as good as some of us any day. Maybe he isn't any bigger'n a two-year-old baby," roared the Hill Bluffer, "but I'm here today to tell you he's all guts!"

He spun on John. "How about it, Shorty? You want Greasy Face handed back to you like scraps from a plate—"

John's long cogitations at last paid off. These and something just witnessed in the Clan Meeting had thrown the switch he had been hunting for.

"Show me that skulking Terror!" he shouted.

The words had barely passed his lips when he felt himself snatched up. The free air whistled past his face. The Hill Bluffer had grabbed him in two huge hands and was now running toward the far woods with him, like a football player with a ball. A roar of voices followed them; looking back, John saw the whole of Clan Hollows in pursuit.

John blinked. He was being jolted along at something like fifty kilometers an hour, and the crowd was coming along behind at the same rate. Or were they? For a long second, John hesitated, then allowed himself to recognize the inescapable fact. All praise to the postman — the Bluffer was outrunning them!

John felt the thrill of competition in his own soul. He and the Hill Bluffer might be worlds apart biologically, but, by heaven, when it came to real competition. . . .

Abruptly, the shadow of the further forest closed about them. The Hill Bluffer ran on dropped needles from the conifers, easing to a lope. John Tardy climbed over his shoulder into the mailbag and hung on.

The forest muffled the roar of pursuit. They descended one side of a small hollow and, coming up the other, the Bluffer dropped to his usual ground-eating walk. On the next downslope, he ran again. And so he continued, alternating his pace as the ground shifted.

"How far to the Terror?" asked John.

"Glen Hollow," puffed the Hill Bluffer. He gave the answer in Dilbian units that worked out to just under eight kilometers.

About ten minutes later, they broke through a small fringe of trees to emerge over the lip of a small cuplike valley containing a meadow split by a stream which, in the meadow's center, spread into a pool. The pool was a good fifty meters across and showed the sort of color

that indicates a fair depth. By the poolside, a male Dilbian was just looking up at the sound of their approach.

John leaned forward and said quietly to the Hill Bluffer, "Put me down by the deepest part of the water." Reaching to his waist, he loosened the buckle of the belt threaded through the loops on his pants.

The Hill Bluffer grunted and continued his descent. At the water's margin, some dozen meters from the waiting Dilbian, he stopped.

"Hello, postman," said the Dilbian.

"Hello, Terror," answered the Bluffer. "Mail."

The Terror looked curiously past the Bluffer's head at John.

"So that's the Half Pint Posted, is it?" he said. "They let you come?"

"No, we just came," said the Bluffer.

While the Terror stared at John Tardy, John had been examining the Terror. The other Dilbian did not, at first glance, seem to live up to his reputation. He was big, but nowhere near the height of the Hill Bluffer, nor the awe-inspiring massiveness of One Man. John noted, however, with an eye which had judged physical capabilities among his own race, the unusually heavy boning of the other's body, the short, full neck, and, more revealing than any of these, the particularly *poised* balance exhibited by the Terror's thick body.

John Tardy threw one quick glance at the water alongside and slid down from the Bluffer's back. The Bluffer moved off and, with no attempt at the amenities, the Streamside Terror charged.

John turned and dived deep into the pool.

He expected the Terror to follow him immediately, reasoning the other was too much the professional fighter to take chances, even with a Shorty. And, indeed, the water-shock of the big body plunging in after John made him imagine the Terror's great clawed hands all but scratching at his heels. John stroked desperately for depth and distance. He did have a strategy of battle, but it all depended on time and elbow room. He changed direction underwater, angled up to the surface, and, flinging the water from his eyes with a jerk of his head, looked around him.

The Terror, looking the other way, had just broken water four meters off.

John dived again and proceeded to get rid of boots, pants and jacket. He came up again practically under the nose of the Terror and was forced to dive once more. But this time, as he went down, he trailed from one fist the belt he had taken from his trousers, waving in the water like a dark stem of weed.

Coming up the third time at a fairly safe distance, John discovered the Terror had spotted him and was coming after him. John grinned to himself and dived, as if to hide again. But under the water he changed direction and swam directly at his opponent. He saw the heavy legs and arms churning toward him overhead.

They moved massively but relatively slowly through the water, and in this he saw the final proof he needed. He had guessed that, effective as the Terror might be against other Dilbians, in the water his very size made him slow and clumsy in comparison to a human — in possibly all but straightaway swimming.

Now John let his opponent pass him overhead. Then, as it went by, he grabbed the foot. And pulled.

The Terror instinctively checked and dived. John, flung surfaceward, let go and dived — this time behind and above the Dilbian. He saw the great back, the churning arms, and then, as the Terror turned once more toward the surface, John closed in, passing the belt around the thick neck and twisting its leather length tight.

At this the Terror, choking, should have headed toward the surface, giving John a chance to breathe. The Dilbian did, John got his breath — and there the battle departed from John's plan entirely.

John had simply failed to give his imagination full rein. He had, in spite of himself, been thinking of the Dilbian in human terms — as a very big man, a man with vast but not inconceivable strength. It is not inconceivable to strangle a giant man with a belt. But how conceivable is it to strangle a grizzly?

John was all but out of reach, stretched at arm's length by his grip on the belt, trailing like a lamprey attached to a lake trout. But now and then the Terror's huge hand, beating back at him through the water, brushed against him. Only brushed — but each impact slammed John about like a chip in the water. His head rang. The water roared about him. His shoulder numbed to a blow and his ribs gave to another.

His senses began to fog; and he tightened his grip on the belt — for it was, in the end, kill or be killed. If he did not do for the Terror, there was no doubt the Terror would...do for...him....

Choking and gasping, he found his hands no longer on the belt, but clawing at the grassy edge of the pond. Hands were helping him. He pulled himself up on the slippery margin. His knees found solid ground. He coughed water and was suddenly, ungracefully sick. Then he blacked out.

He came around after an indeterminate time to find his head in someone's lap. He blinked upward and a blur of color slowly turned into the face of Ty Lamorc, very white and taut — and crying.

"What?" he croaked.

"Oh, shut up!" she said. She was wiping his damp face with a rag of cloth that was nearly as wet as he was.

"No —" he managed. "I mean — what're you doing here?" He tried to sit up.

"Lie down!"

"I'm all right — I think." He struggled into sitting position. The whole area of Glen Hollow, he saw, was aswarm with Dilbians. A short way off, a knot of them were gathered on the pool-bank around something.

"What—?" he began.

"The Terror, Half Pint," said a familiar voice, and he looked up at the looming figure of the Hill Bluffer, mountainous from this angle. "He's still out. It's your fight, all right." He went off, and they could hear him informing the other group down the bank that the Shorty was up and talking.

John Tardy looked at Ty.

"What happened?" he asked.

"They had to pull him out. You made it to shore by yourself." She found a handkerchief somewhere, wiped her eyes and blew her nose vigorously. "You were wonderful."

"Wonderful?" said John, still too groggy for subtlety. "I was out of my head to even think of it!" He felt his ribs gingerly. "I better get back to Humrog and have an X-ray of this side."

"Oh, are your ribs broken?"

"Maybe just bruised. Wow!" said John, coming on an especially tender spot.

"Oh!" wept Ty. "You might have been killed! And it's all my fault!"

"Your fault?" said John. He spotted the massive figure of One Man breaking away from the group around the fallen Terror and hissed quickly at her. "Hurry. Help me up." She assisted him clumsily to his feet. "Tell me, did they find anything around the Terror's neck when they pulled him out?"

She stared at him and wiped her eyes. "Why, no. What should they find around his neck?"

"Nothing," whispered John. "Well!" he said as One Man rolled up to a halt before them. "What do you think of the situation?"

"I think, Half Pint," said One Man, "that it's all very interesting. Very interesting indeed. I think you Shorties may be getting a few takers now on this business of going off into the sky and learning things."

"You do, eh? How about you, for one?"

"No-o," said One Man slowly. "No, I don't think me. I'm a little too old to jump at new things that quick. Some of the young ones'll be ready, though. The Terror, for one, possibly. He's quite a bright lad, you know. Of course, now that you've done the preliminary spadework, I may put in a good word for you people here and there."

"Mighty nice of you — now," said John, a little bitterly.

"Nothing wins like a winner, Half Pint," rumbled One Man. "You Shorties should have known that. Matter of fact, I'm surprised it took you so long to show some common sense. You just don't come in and sit down at a man's table and expect him to take your word for it that you're one of the family. As I said to you once before, who asked you Shorties to come here, anyway, in the first place? And what made you think we had to like you? What if, when you were a lad, some new kid moved into your village? He was half your size, but he had a

whole lot of shiny new playthings you didn't have, and he came up and tapped you on the shoulder and said, 'C'mon, from now on we'll play my sort of game!' How'd you think you'd have felt?"

He eyed John shrewdly out of his hairy face.

"I see," said John, after a moment. "Then why'd you help me?"

"Me? Help you? I was as neutral as they come. What're you talking about?"

"We've got something back home called a phone directory — a book like those manuals Little Bite has down at Humrog. It's about this thick—" he measured with thumb and forefinger. "And for one of us Shorties, you'd say it was a physical impossibility to pick it up and tear it in two. But some of us can do it." He eyed One Man. "Of course, there's a trick to it."

"Well, now," said One Man judiciously, "I can believe it. Directories, thick sticks, or first-class hill-and-alley scrappers — there's a trick to handle almost any of them. Not that I'd ever favor a Shorty over any of us in the long run — don't get that idea." He looked around them. The Streamside Terror was being helped out of the Glen and most of the crowd was already gone. "We'll have to get together for a chat one of these days, Half Pint. Well, see you in the near future, Shorties."

John Tardy wiped a damp nose with the back of his hand and stared after One Man. Then he turned to Ty Lamore.

"Now," he said, "what'd you mean — it was all your

fault?"

"It was," she said miserably. "It was all my idea. Earth knew we weren't getting through to the Dilbians, so they sent me out. And I—" she gulped — "I recommended they send out a man who conformed as nearly as possible to the Dilbian psychological profile and we'd get him mixed up in a Dilbian emotional situation — to convince them we weren't the utter little aliens we seemed to be. They've got a very unusual culture here. They really have. I never thought Boy-Is-She-Built would catch up with you and nearly kill you and take your wrist-phone away. You were supposed to be able to stay in contact with Joshua Guy so he could always rescue you from the other end."

"I see. Any why," queried John, very slowly and patiently, "did you decide not to let me in on what was going on?"

"Because," she wailed, "I thought it would be better for you to react like the Dilbians in a natural, extroverted, uncerebral way!"

"I see," said John again. They were still standing beside the pool. He picked her up — she was quite light and slender — and threw her in. There was a shriek and a satisfying splash. John turned and walked off.

After half a dozen steps, he slowed down, turned and went back. She was clinging to the bank.

"Here," he said gruffly, extending his hand.

"Thag you," she said humbly, with her nose full of water, as he hauled her out.

—GORDON R. DICKSON



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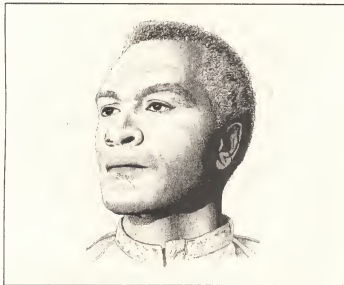
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Illustrated by Williamson

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"Courts Martial"

German: "Kirk unter Anklage" (Kirk Under Accusation)
Japanese: "Uchuu Gunpoukaigi" (Court Martial in Space)
Portuguese: "Corte Marcial" (Court Martial)

Story: DON M. MANKIEWICZ

Teleplay: DON M. MANKIEWICZ & STEVEN W.
CARABATSOS

Director: MARC DANIELS

Producer: GENE L. COON

Executive Producer: GENE RODDENBERRY

Associate Producer: ROBERT H. JUSTMAN

Script Consultant: STEVEN W. CARABATSOS

Aired: 2/2/67

STARDATE: 2947.3 — The Enterprise puts in at Starbase 11 for repairs to damage incurred during an ion storm. Kirk discovers that he faces a court martial for negligence resulting in the death of Lieutenant Commander Benjamin Finney.

A former girlfriend of Kirk's, Arel Shaw, is the Starfleet lawyer determined to prosecute the case to its fullest, even if it means ruining Kirk's career. However, she still has a soft spot for the Captain and recommends shrewd, energetic Samuel T. Cogley for Kirk's defense lawyer. Shaw's prosecution is based on the Enterprise's computer records, which Kirk claims are erroneous. By playing chess with the Enterprise computer, Spock finds that the programming has been tampered with.

Resuming the trial aboard the Enterprise, the judges find that Finney is not dead but in hiding. A vengeful

Finney changed the computer records to frame Kirk, who once logged a careless and potentially dangerous error of Finney's. This prevented Finney's promotion and expected rise through Starfleet ranks. Cogley wins Kirk's case and promptly takes a new one: Finney's defense.

CAST:

Kirk: WILLIAM SHATNER

Spock: LEONARD NIMOY

McCoy: DeFOREST KELLEY

Uhura: NICHELLE NICHOLS

Lieutenant Commander Benjamin Finney: RICHARD WEBB

Computer (Voice): MAJEL BARRETT

Helmsman Hansen: HAGAN BEGGS

Portmaster Stone: PERCY RODRIGUEZ

Samuel T. Cogley: ELISHA COOK Jr.

Lieutenant Arel Shaw: JOAN MARSHALL

Jame Finney: ALICE RAWLINGS

Timothy: WINSTON De LUGO

Personnel Officer: NANCY WONG

Court Martial Board:

Space Command Representative Lindstrom:
WILLIAM MEADER

Captain Chandra: REGINALD LAL SINGH

Captain Krasnovsky: BART CONRAD

Officer in club: TOM CURTIS

Starbase Recorder computer (Voice): MAJEL BARRETT

Kirk's stunt double: CHUCK CLOW

Finney's stunt double: TROY MELTON

UNCREDITED ATMOSPHERE: Other officers in club: 5 extra males; 1 female; waitress; bartender aide; 4 bridge personnel; Navigator; Engineer; Recorder's voice for library computer; Recorder machine voice; 1 Personnel officer

NOTES:

Sulu was originally to be named "Sumo" (8/15/66) and was supposed to be the helmsman — then wasn't in the show at all.

Studio memo: "Janice is much too close to Kirk and too involved in his personal life and decisions", so her part in this episode was given to Uhura. They were already writing Grace Lee Whitney out of the show.

"Jame" Finney was originally "Jamie" — it was pronounced the same.

NBC Network Broadcast Standards Department sent memos on this script:

(1) Avoid any open-mouth kisses.

(2) Delete "thank God" from Cogley's speech. NBC was extremely sensitive to the Bible Belt, but Gene Roddenberry fought this, as he did all memos about common speech that might contain religious connotations. GR won on this one.

GR liked the name "Lal" — later, in Star Trek: The Next Generation, the android Data named his android daughter "Lal."

Time jumped rapidly in this episode: it went from



FOR YOUR INFORMATION

By CLAUDE NEEDHAM, Ph.D.

Illustrated by Freas

Honey, bumble barf, wasp whoop, bee vomit, apis spew, hornet hoop, *Hymenoptera* hurl. These and several other not so flowery phrases refer to the regurgitated product from certain insects — mostly *Apis mellifera*. If someone walked up to you at a party with an invitation to partake of a sticky partially-digested amber fluid that had been robbed from wax holding vessels filled by vomit (from small flying insects) intended for storage, continued digestion and consumption by themselves and their children, would you say “Yes that sounds marvelous, I’d love to try some”? No. I don’t think so. No more than you would say, “Yes, I would love to pry open the calcified covering of a *Pelecypoda* and pour sweetened tomato puree mixed with spicy tuber root over the raw unprotected flesh of a living boneless bivalve mollusk swimming in a teaspoon of residual sea water and plummet the same still throbbing animal into a pool of acid at the bottom of my stomach.” No, only the fevered mind of a horror film writer could imagine such a gruesome torture inflicted upon another.

Apis mellifera — the common honey bee — what’s its story? How is it that a bunch of be-winged factories can turn random droplets of plant nectar into honey? Do they worship and make supplications to the great and fearsome god Hand that orders their lives with divine indifference? How long does it take a train traveling 50 mph due east leaving Pittsburgh at 6:00 a.m. to meet a boat traveling due west up the Hudson River? Will

Donna discover that Brad is not the lover she hoped but rather the uncle of Phil who removed her left ear mistakenly believing it to be a malignant tumor while all the time Joan was secretly dating Donna’s first cousin the assistant? Will this author be committed in time to spare us further inane questions? Can we move on to the next paragraph without the threat of mayhem? These and many other questions are answered following this paragraph break.

Nectar is not bad stuff. Water and sugar. Add a little food coloring, carbonization and label. . .you could have a nice soft drink. Problem is it’s spread all over the pasture. Even the engineering department at Davis School of Agriculture would be hard pressed to come up with a machine that could gather nectar in a cost efficient manner. Let’s face it, these little bee guys work cheap. Free nectar and pollen and they’re happy. Heck they can have all the pollen they want as far as I’m concerned. The less of the stuff in the atmosphere the better I like it. Have you ever seen a picture of a pollen grain under an electron microscope? I have — medieval instruments of confession look more inviting. The Spanish Inquisition, now there’s a lively bunch that knew how to inspire conversion. Even as we prepare to enter the 21st century, thousands of Mexican and Spanish Jews are still hiding under the cover of Catholicism.

So a few industrious buzzers collect the nectar — then what? Were you aware that the water content of nectar varies? Well, it does. Anything from thirty or forty percent to ninety percent or more. Maybe less, maybe more, who’s got the time to sample the water content of each and every flower? Besides some of these flowers are open to low humidity drying winds that would suck the water content from a rock. With the random effects of weather and the natural distribution of variability amongst the flora it’s no surprise that the

water content is not uniform. Heck darn diversity is the seed of evolution. However, as any marketer can advise, consumers prefer to buy products that they can trust to be the same from day to day and purchase to purchase. Bottom line: it just won't work to deliver a product that varies from watery to thick — depending on time of year, plants involved, and humidity of the pasture. Fortunately, the bees have solved this little problem quite nicely.

The forager bees (little buzzers that fly around sucking up nectar from flowers and such) gather the raw material. These guys forage for nectar, gather and bring it back to the hive. Since they don't have handy-dandy little buckets (like in cartoons) the bees suck the honey down using a convenient organ located just posterior to the mouth affectionately called the sucking pump. From here the nectar is shuttled down the esophagus into a thin-walled sac (corresponding to the crop of other insects) called the honey stomach — so called because it is used to carry nectar or honey. Separating the honey stomach and the ventriculus (the real stomach) is a small sphincter like opening called the stomach mouth. The stomach mouth prevents the nectar from passing from the honey stomach into the further reaches of the honey bees' digestive system. It is here in the honey stomach that the nectar is stored during the long flight from flower to hive.

Depending on whether a nectar-find was worthy of pride or required help, the first thing a foraging bee would do upon returning to the hive is dance a little jig — thus giving the other foragers a clue to the size and location of a nectar-find. After this oratory in farting and tap-dancing is complete the forager bee (still loaded with a stomach full of nectar) would look for a house bee to receive the raw nectar. When a house bee is found, that is not otherwise occupied, the forager bee regurgitates said raw materials. As foraging bees are apt to be heard saying, "I have enough to do foraging without having to do all the processing as well. You'd think with sitting around the hive all day she could keep the combs cleaner and do a little processing."

In keeping with all post-industrialized factory management, the foraging bees leave the post-gathering production to house bees. Having completed their unionized roll of gathering, the foraging bees regurgitate the only slightly digested nectar and let the house bees suck it down for further processing. When the forager bee has passed a drop of nectar along, the house bee moves into action working its tiny little jaws to the chitin converting the nectar droplet into honey.

The house bee has two main processing responsibilities. The first is to dehydrate the nectar into a stable product with batch to batch consistency. This is accomplished by vomiting the nectar and chewing it down over and over again. Each cycle of the process

takes about twenty seconds. Given that on the average a house bee will work approximately fifteen to twenty minutes on each droplet of nectar, that translates into about fifty chew-swallow-regurgitate cycles — guaranteed to eventually dry out even the watery-est nectar. When the nectar's water content reaches an agreed upon concentration (set by arbitrated agreement between management and labor) the house bee stops chewing and adds the partially digested nectar to a cell in the honey comb. It is here that the second processing responsibility of the house bee is accomplished.

The sugar profile of raw nectar varies from simple (glucose and fructose) to complex (sucrose). That will never do for feeding young baby bees and besides sucrose is too close to the white crystals of death extracted from sugar cane and beets to be very effective on the retail market. Nope, in the health food market something different (and sweeter) is required — at least if one wants to compete for that ever elusive (and perhaps mob controlled) shelf-space.

To solve this marketing dilemma house bees inject the enzyme invertase into the nectar. The invertase enzyme converts sucrose into smaller, simpler and sweeter sugars. The process is begun in the stomach to be completed in the wax holding tanks of the honey comb over the course of a few weeks.

Next time before complaining of how much work it is to lay in a supply of canned tomatoes and pickles for the winter, you may wish to recall the job of the house bee and count yourself lucky. Who would want to chew and spit up cucumbers all night long? Come to think of it, that's the very thing that happened to me the last time I had cucumbers in my salad. Perhaps I should put it into a wax-bucket next to the nursery and let it finish digesting there. Strained cucumbers, that's one food product you don't see on the grocery store shelves everyday.

—CLAUDE NEEDHAM, Ph.D.

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About the author: Dr. Needham is a bio-physics research specialist, as well as a sculptor, author and humorist. His background is shortest in plasma physics and wave-form research. His loves are aluminum and a good piece of Argon vitae.

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d'évider avide,
de se brifer avide,
de se hisser, de se piller, de disparaître,
paraître à disparaître,
d'être à paraître à disparaître à être
avide.

Glisse éperdu à perte,
glisse sur place,
glisse stress vers self-extingue.
'néantisse qui s'anéantit.
Rien qui se rien.
Roue roulant sans fouler qui se ffffbhh.



A fine copy of this important and very early graphic work by Marc Chagall. This little book is rich in images of the *Stetle* (the little Jewish ghetto villages which dotted the Russian landscape) in which Chagall spent his childhood before emigrating to France.

[4], 95, [3] pp. With 5 original etchings by Chagall. 4to. Original wrappers. Paris: *Au Sans Pareil*, 1926.

This volume contains five hard-to-find original etchings, one of which is reminiscent of "The Birthday", one of Chagall's more famous paintings — that's the one you see in High School Art Appreciation 101, where he's serpentineally flying and kissing her, remember?

Maternité provides a time-machine allowing us to peek into the earliest period of Chagall's art — a period we may not be able to afford to collect in oils, watercolors or gouaches, but which are very affordable in etching format.

Here, Marc Chagall demonstrates the clearest examples of his early ingenuousness and we see the very source of his later artistic inspirations.

Don't be fooled by the large edition; actually, this is quite a scarce book! This copy is #574 on Lafuma de Voiron paper of a total edition of 940. Skira 42. *Print Quarterly* IV, no. 1, pp. 50-56.

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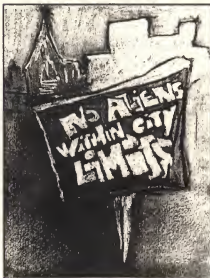
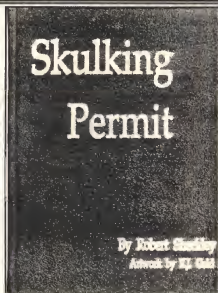
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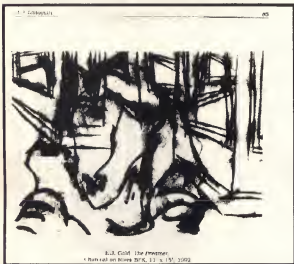
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BY A.J. LANGGUTH



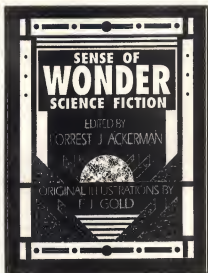
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- The New Republic

E.J. Gold (the frontispiece)
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From SIRIUS SCIENCE FICTION SENSE OF WONDER

Edited by Forrest J Ackerman
Illustrated by E.J. Gold



SENSE OF WONDER SCIENCE FICTION

Edited and with Commentaries by Forrest J Ackerman
Illustrated by E.J. Gold

A note from Sirius Science Fiction Editor, Ivan Lourie: "When I bought a house in an old neighborhood in Tucson, Arizona, in the seventies, my neighbors were an elderly couple who had lived there since the 1930s. I found out that they had an immense paperback book collection, including science fiction. One day, as I sat in their musty living room talking with them about 'the good old days,' the woman brought out a paperback she handled carefully with great reverence, and insisted I must read it. I did read it, and I did lose my breath away at some scenes. That paperback was *The Face in the Abyss* by A. Merritt. I got the feeling that in the thirties or forties, when that came out, Merritt's work was for young science fiction fans who cyberpunk is now, or what I like to call were when I was growing up."

Forrest J Ackerman has gathered, with the original 1927 novella version of "The Face in the Abyss," a collection of unforgettable stories from the childhood of science fiction as the genre we know today—called then "scientifiction," as Forry explains. If *Galaxy* and *Beyond* and *F & SF*, the editorial works of Horace Gold and Anthony Boucher, were the coming-of-age of science fiction, these stories from the twenties and thirties, from such pulp as *Amazing Stories* and *Science Wonder Stories*, represent the first bloom of the genre's youthful energy. They will truly awaken your "sense of wonder" as a reader, and remind you why you started reading science fiction in the first place, so many years ago—whether you've ever read these authors or not. I have to say, as I said to Forry in the early stages of working on this book, that I've never had more fun proof-reading anything in my career as a reader and editor.

Forry, himself the senior statement of science fiction editing and agency, is your ideal guide through this carnival of adventure and astonishing imaginative leaps. Many of the genre heretofore are curiously "in the rough."

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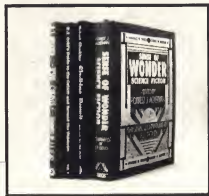
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Rarities for Sale

Matisse, Henri **Pierre a Feu**
86,(4)pp.

This beautiful little book features two original works on paper; they are portraits of women: 1 original linocut and 1 original lithograph by Matisse, both printed in black; also a *lithographic frontispiece of the Firebird printed in blue after a drawing by Matisse*. 14 heliogravure plates in text reproducing drawings by Matisse. 4to. Dec. wraps. With bound-in wraps printed in 5-color pochoir with a design by Matisse especially made for this publication. Rebound in fine leather, 5 raised bands, gold embossed, designed by *E.J. Gold*.

Lithography was by the Mourlot brothers. Texts by Aragon, Eluard, Callois, Lely, Char, Spyridaki, Marchand, Hugnet, Jaguer, Solier, Kober and others.

Published as an homage to Matisse.

Ref: *Dutuit 17*

Paris; *Maeght* editor, 1947; #912 of 950 limited edition (there were 999 printed in all, including proofs, on *velin superieur*, a wonderful paper that, at least in this copy, has aged well.)

\$ 12,500

Maillol, Aristide: **Les Pastorales de Longus ou Daphnis et Chloe.**

Version d'Amyot, revue et complétée par P.L. Courier. Bois originaux d'Aristide Maillol. (Paris: Gonin), 1937.

Two volumes: Bound: loose in original wrappers, publisher's chemises & slipcases.

This is **copy no. 1** -- the editor's copy -- on Maillol paper with an original pencil-drawing on transfer tissue. The sketch is pencil-signed by Maillol with his initial "M", and it is significant that the drawing is further labeled by the editor-publisher, Philippe Gonin.

There were 6 proofs, two sets of woodcuts pulled in black and in sanguine. 500 copies on Maillol paper, plus 25 or more copies produced hors commerce (not for sale). The interior page size is about 8 1/2" x 5 1/4".

This copy is numbered with Roman numeral "I", not Arabic "1" -- with two additional suites of woodcuts, one in black and one in sanguine, not called for and signed by the publisher, Gonin.

See: *The Artist and the Book*, 174

Garvey & Wick, 22
Wheeler, 131

This is a very important and perhaps unique example, as it is the publisher's own copy. We doubt there is another like it, and would dearly love to know of something similar.

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Chagall, Marc: **Illustrations for The Bible.** (Verve # 33-34) AND **Drawings for the Bible.** (Verve # 37-38) Two volumes. Folio, original boards. Paris, Editions de la Revue Verve: 1956, 1960.

Fine and nicely matched copies of the First and Only issue of Chagall's illustrations for this Bible which documents and complements the edition of the Bible published by Teriade in 1956.

These two volumes contain a total of 40 original color lithographs. Unfortunately, most sets of this work have been plundered for plates by print dealers. Complete sets in such good condition are becoming exceedingly difficult to locate.

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Maillol, Aristide, Virgile. **Les Georgiques.** Texte Latin et version française de l'Abbé Jacques Delille, gravures sur bois d'Aristide Maillol. Paris, Philippe Gonin, 1937-43 (1950). 2 vols. 4to. (2), 174, (2); (2), 154, (2) pp. including 122 woodcuts, of which some are illustrated initial letters.

Unseen, as issued, in publisher's cream wrappers, preserved in quarter vellum slipcase and chemise. With the prospectus for the work, loosely inserted.

One of a limited edition of 750 copies printed on rag-wave paper, watermarked with Maillol's "seated nude".

Maillol began the first drawings for this project in 1908 when, returning from a trip to Greece with Count Harry Kessler of the Cranach Press, he stopped over at Naples and Pompeii.

Over the next three decades, he added a few more cuts to the original work and in 1937 Gonin urged him to resume the project; the final block was delivered just before the artist died.

Maillol's eyesight was poor during the last years of his life, so the actual cutting for the project was executed by craftsmen working from the artist's sketches made directly on the print surface of the wood block.

See: *Artist & Book* p. 175 This copy is no. 472/750.

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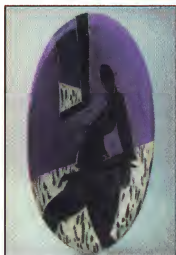
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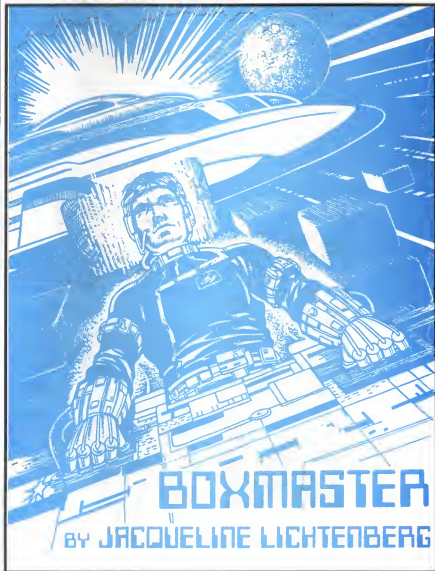
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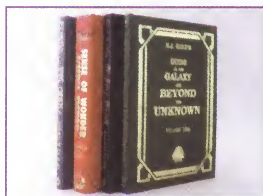
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